Mountebank's Monster and His Mom: a peculiar resurrection

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Chapter One

The first time I noticed a change in my mom's behavior was when she started calling me on the phone "for no special reason," as she had put it. For all of my life before then she had only ever called me for clearly-stated, specific reasons—to tell me she had received a letter for me or found something pertaining to me in one of her file drawers, for example.

Her life-long telephone habit was a bit cold, but I was used it. I knew she did not like talking on the phone with anyone unless there was a good reason. Having been born in 1916, she retained the sensibility well into the 21st century that phone calls were expensive and had to be rationed.

I was delighted to hear from her, of course, and especially so because she was calling for no other reason than to speak with me.

"I'm just calling for no special reason," she might say. "It's a beautiful day here and I was wondering how you are."

I was living at a Buddhist temple in California at the time. "I'm fine. It's a beautiful day here, too. How are you?"

I really enjoyed those phone calls because she was so friendly and warm. She was around 79 or 80 at the time, and very much in possession of all her marbles. I assumed she had changed her style because she was getting older and wanted to reach out to me in a new way, which was actually the case.

Her phone calls "for no special reason" began sometime after she had started having "discussion sessions" with some of her friends. During those sessions she and five or six of her friends talked about sensitive topics they had been avoiding all of their lives.

My mom only told me about those sessions some time later so at the time, I was not completely sure why she was calling me so often.

I was living in a Buddhist temple because I had been hired to translate some books. What I was learning about Buddhism was helping me interact more affectionately with my mother. We didn't have deep discussions over the phone, but our tone was deeper and kinder than it had ever been before.

At first, those calls just came once a month or so. But as time went on, she started calling as often as once a week. Until that time, it had virtually always been me who called her, usually just once or twice a month. As she called more often, I called her more often and before long we established a new pattern of speaking a few times a week.

Since she was getting older, I sometimes encouraged her to move to California so I could look after her if the need arose.

"No," she always replied, "I like it right here and I'm not going to move anywhere."

She had lived in her house in Scarsvale, New York since 1959 and in the town of Scarsvale since 1950. "Why would I want to go all the way across the country to live in *California?*" she would add if I protested and she felt the need to give me another reason. "No. I like it right here."

She had visited California for a month at a time on three occasions in the 1950s and 60s and had liked it, but for her it was mainly a place you went to go to the beach. For many Easterners in her generation, California was not a place to be taken seriously, a view vaguely in keeping with how the telephone was not an instrument to be used for frivolous reasons.

"Well, I hope you change your mind one of these days because conditions here are perfect. I can find you a place near me and you will love the climate. There are flowers blooming year-round."

"No, I would hate it. I would have nothing to do and it's too hot."

Most of what she did at the time involved flower shows at the Scarsvale Woman's Club, administrative duties at the Scarsvale Congregational Church, and for a few recent years the "discussion sessions" she had been having with her friends. One day she told me about the sessions on one of my trips home, saying that they had been very helpful to her for understanding me, among other things.

"So, what do you do at these sessions," I asked as we drove down School Lane past the Hitchcock Church in Scarsvale.

"We just talk," she said.

"Like…"

"Well, for example, one week one of the women said that we all should have a different understanding of marijuana. She said that if our children liked it, we probably would, too."

That surprised me. I answered, "You would love it."

"I would?" she said. "Why?"

"Because it enhances aesthetic feeling. People like you who enjoy art, flower arranging, music almost always like marijuana."

"I wonder if I should try it," she said.

"If I had any, I would give you some."

She did not decline. I am sorry to say the opportunity to get my mom stoned never arose again.

Later during that same visit home she asked me what homosexuals did. This was probably 1997 and my poor old momma still did not know what homosexuals did.

She appeared quite embarrassed when she asked the question. Her face reddened slightly and stiffened as if she were preparing for the worst. We were in the car this time, too. Car rides were a time for us to talk of matters that should not be mentioned at home.

I said, "They have sex, just like other people."

"But *how* do they have sex?" she asked.

"Well, if they are men they might have oral or anal sex."

With that, she turned so red and looked so amazed, I feared she might crash the car.

"They *do*? I always thought that homosexual just meant someone who had a lot of male friends, someone who was very friendly."

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Yes, and I am so sorry, Tommy. I didn't know… but… I used to tell your father that I thought *you* were a homosexual. But all I meant… Oh, your father must have thought… Oh, I am so sorry…"

I felt very sorry for my mom at that point. She looked dumbfounded as her amazing innocence came crashing down around her. She pulled her head into her shoulders and squinted her blue eyes toward the road ahead.

Her reaction, which indicated profound, helpless shame and confusion, said so much—she did not know what a homosexual even was; she had been unable to find out except by asking me, her son; she had never been able to talk about the subject with her own husband, who had very probably never cleared up that miscommunication which almost certainly had a major effect on how he treated me. (For the record, I am heterosexual.)

Years later, my sister Mira told me that mom had called her one day to ask what oral sex was. Not sure if that call came before or after the conversation described above.

I bet it's hard for young people today to understand my mom's mind-set, but that's how it was.

On that visit home or on another one just before or after, my mom had a conversation with me in her favorite Chinese restaurant where she apologized to me about having had me get an operation to correct a mild lazy-eye when I was thirteen.

"She should have gone to jail," my mom said speaking in an uncharacteristically angry tone while leaning over the table toward me. She was referring to the doctor who performed the surgery, which had a devastating effect on my health for years after. That was the first time she had referred to that operation since it had happened. We had never discussed it before then.

"I am very sorry about that. She fooled me," my mom said. The way the doctor fooled her was my mom was an attorney and had been admitted to the Massachusetts bar in the late 1940s, though she never practiced. The doctor, in 1964, when the operation was performed, was also, what was in those days, a rare professional woman. I remember visiting her office with my mom, who seemed to bask in what she took to be the respect and attention shown her by the doctor, who in my opinion was a fraud, a mountebank.

Years later, I spoke with some people from Scarsvale who thought my mom may have had an episode of the emotional disorder Munchhausen's syndrome by proxy. This disorder entails getting attention from doctors, who are perceived as authority figures, by presenting *someone else* (me, in this case) as being ill when they are not, or in need of medical attention when they don't really need it.

Since I saw the "doctor" and my mom together many times and since neither of them—typically smiling broadly toward each other—paid the slightest attention to me while the three of us were together, I am inclined to think that diagnosis of Munchhausen's is credible. I mention this because surgery for my eye was not the way my mom normally dealt with medical problems. Her usual way was to ignore all pains and discomforts and not go see a doctor unless symptoms were serious. We never even had aspirin in our house and I never took it until I was well over thirty; my mom never took it. Later in life my mom consistently refused all medical attention for herself. I imagine my experience with eye surgery made her anti-medical attitude even firmer. By the way, some more evidence that the doctor was a mountebank is this: a nurse came to my room at the New York Eye, Ear, Nose, and Throat Hospital the night before the operation and told me I should get out of there. "Just leave," she said, "You don't need this operation from *her*." I was thirteen and had little life experience, so I refused. On the morning of the operation (the next morning), a different nurse wheeled my cot near to the operating room door, but left it outside the door. I have been told since that this was how medical staff protested against bad or immoral doctors in those days. "It's not a good way to protest," the person who told me said, "because it just makes them angrier." After the operation, I was very sick and could not walk. As I was wheeled out of the hospital in a wheelchair, a number of doctors and nurses stood in the hall watching me go by. At the time, I did not understand why they were watching me, but now I do. There's an old song with the line: *They looked at me and shed a tear/ I'm glad those people cared*.

Much of life back then was filled with consumer pleasures, alcohol, and trips to warm places. But it was also shot through with deep veins of violence and hate. Today, when we read about those times, we tend to see only some kinds of hate, but in truth, there were many kinds. That strange doctor hated me, at thirteen, for something I surely never did. That my mom could be fooled by a person like that and even realize it afterward but never do anything about it shows to some degree how vanity and shame mixed in her. That a group of doctors in the hospital could stand in the hall and solemnly watch me leave, but not prevent what had happened, says much about them.

My mom could be a fairly demanding person with her children and assertive, or at least definite, with people in "official" settings such as the church or Women's Club, but I do not believe that beyond that she was an aggressive person and not vengeful at all. She knew for years that my operation was substandard, to say the least, but she never pursued it further, not legally, not medically, and not with me emotionally in any way. In many areas, she took things as they came and did not try to change the past.

Chapter Two

Our phone calls continued warmly and we made progress toward considerably better mutual understanding until she fell and broke her hip in October of 2000. Nothing much changed at first, but after an operation to pin her hip and a few months of recovering from that, we (her children) all noticed a marked decline in cognitive function. She seemed to have lost about one-third of her general intelligence and capacity to respond to the world around her. For years, my sister Carol and I believed with some conviction that the cause of her decline had been the operation and its use of a general anesthetic. There is evidence that general anesthetics can cause memory and cognitive problems in older adults, and this may have been a contributing factor to my mom's condition, but time would tell that her fall and her mental decline afterward was most probably caused by the onset of a type of dementia called *Dementia with Lewy Bodies* (DLB). As of this writing, this condition is not generally well-known, though it affects some ten percent of all elderly dementia sufferers. DLB affects the neocortex with plaques that are similar to the plaques found in Alzheimer's patients, though in Alzheimer's the plaques are formed elsewhere in the brain.

DLB is related to Parkinson's disease and is defined as being different only by which symptoms appear first. If the stiffness and tremors of Parkinson's appear first, that is generally the diagnosis. If cognitive problems appear first and continue for a year or so without marked Parkinsonian movement disorder, DLB is generally the diagnosis.

No one ever diagnosed my mom with DLB and we will never know for certain what to call her condition because DLB can only be determined reliably postmortem, but after about ten more years (in 2010), she displayed all of the symptoms of DLB, and especially its most characteristic symptom—vivid, extensive hallucinations with which she interacted.

When I spoke with her on the phone for the first time after her fall, she was in the hospital recovering from her hip operation. She displayed no signs of depression but was instead bubbly, almost buoyant. "The nurse just compliment my hair!" she said one day. "How do you like that!" I could all but see her flashing a big smile as she sat propped on pillows in her hospital bed. Later in life, she was a great one for complimenting other people's looks and for receiving compliments herself.

I couldn't say it was out of character for her to tell me that the nurse had complimented her hair, but it didn't quite feel like the her I had been getting used to over the past few years. Her statements were a little too shallow and too enthusiastic for such a small matter. I chalked it up to the operation and any drugs she might be taking.

"Tell me what happened," I asked.

"Well, I was going upstairs to bed at about ten o'clock and as I turned at the top of the stairs, I slipped and fell. It was because of a new pair of shoes I was wearing. They were slipperier than what I was used to."

"What did you do after you fell? Was anyone home to help you?"

"No, Maria had gone long before. Well, I just got myself up and made it to the big chair in my bedroom." Maria was someone who came in a few times a week to sort of clean the house and sort of help my mom. The two of them fought fairly often and my mom fired her several times before Maria finally left for good. I never met her. My sisters liked her but thought she did just the bare minimum to help my mom.

"What did you do when you got to the chair in your bedroom?" I asked.

"I just sat in it."

"Didn't you call anyone?"

"No, I didn't want to bother anyone and I thought that I had just bruised my hip and that I would be OK in the morning."

"Don't tell me you sat there all night long."

"Yes, I did. When Maria came in the morning, I called to her and she called an ambulance because I could not stand up."

An elderly friend of mine, who has since passed away, used to say with some regularity, "Old-age is not for wusses." And it's not. My mom's basic formula, which she held to to the end, was never complain, always be grateful, take what comes. She did complain sometimes about small problems like a headache

or sore arm, but never about more than that, and she always refused pain medication except once or twice. She was a perfect stoic, and especially in the sense that that was how she was; her attitude was not a philosophy or belief; it was who she was.

I doubt I will be like her if I make it to her age and I am not sure that I want to be, but her formula of never complaining and always being grateful was a life-long trait. My father was the same, and neither of them liked it much or responded at all if any of their children complained. That's a good way to be, but for me it leaves out too much. I want to know how my friends feel, if they hurt, or are getting tired or frustrated. I don't see that as complaining but as information about them. My parents' attitude surely must have had a good deal to do with neither of them showing the slightest sympathy or concern for the very pronounced and devastating effects of my eye operation. In retrospect, they may have been right about that, too. I was forced to endure a kind of torture few will ever know, but what could anyone have done for me? Would sympathy have helped me or made me dependent and overly focused on my condition?

Mom left the hospital sometime in late October to finish recuperating at home. By late December, her cognitive decline had become undeniable. She was still the same person, more or less, but less attentive, more forgetful, and more childlike. All four of her children were concerned, but there was nothing we could do to change anything. Mom was still able to drive short distances and generally care for herself; she was just less "with it," as she might have said, than in the past.

Honestly, in some ways I liked the change that came over her. She became even warmer toward me and called more often. So much of her normal personality, as with so many of her generation, was made up of consciously adopted traits—not complaining, as discussed, but also the presumptions that the way she was was the only way to be; that what she enjoyed was enjoyed by everyone; or that what she valued was valued by everyone and if you did not value it there was something wrong with you. These values included respect (too much) for money, status, and good spirits (both kinds). After her decline, she dropped most of the stiffness and pride that marked so many of her supposedly "greatest generation." When I spoke with her on the phone, she was kinder, warmer, and even more considerate than she had been before.

Now that she has passed away, I sense that I can feel her in a different way than when she was alive. Maybe I feel her deep presence. Maybe I am better able to see how the particular constraints of her personality as it was molded in her time and place did not hold the entirety of who she really was. Each of us is constrained by our circumstances and culture, but surely that is not all there is to any of us.

Chapter Three

On my first visit with her after her fall, she was still in pretty good shape. She could walk fairly long distances without a cane and could still drive her car well enough. I did not feel nervous or concerned as her passenger when she took me on a drive to a nature center about one hour away.

She wanted to show me the grounds, she said, but she also wanted me to meet Bob, one of her friends who volunteered at the nature center. A charming side to old people is they grow a bit easier to read. Their expressions come and go more slowly and they often emphasize subtle, unconscious aspects of what they are saying more than a young person would. I really didn't know why my mom wanted me to meet her friend, but from her demeanor I suspected she wanted to share her newfound understanding of me with him.

"I want you to meet my friend. I've told him a lot about you," she said as we parked the car. "But first let's look at these gardens over here."

We walked across the parking lot to some bushes that no longer had any leaves on them. "You can't see very much now, but in the spring, these are beautiful plantings," my mom declared. I sensed that she was gearing up for a social exchange more than showing me the bushes.

After my eye operation, my social presence in Scarsvale declined very quickly. I drifted away from all of my boyhood friends, while my school grades went down. My eighth grade teacher, Mrs. Gold, understood that something had happened to me, but she was one of the only people in Scarsvale who did. The operation occurred about one week before school. I had a bandage over my eye for maybe ten days, including the first few days of school. The reason Mrs. Gold noticed I had changed was she had also been my seventh grade teacher. I was in an experimental class that stayed together for two years with her. Other classes in what was then Scarsvale Junior High School were broken up and students assigned to new teachers each year.

In seventh grade I had been lively and talkative. During the whole of eighth grade, I don't believe I said a single word in class with one exception. Mrs. Gold was asking some questions about American history one day and I noticed that she was only calling on students who were not raising their hands, so I raised my hand. After months of saying nothing whatever, I learned later, Mrs. Gold was delighted to see me participate and called on me immediately. All I was able to do was mumble that I did not know the answer. She asked me, "Then why did you raise your hand?"

"Because I could see you were calling on people who were not raising their hands," I replied.

Mrs. Gold looked pained and the class laughed, but the moment passed without too much embarrassment. No one in that class was ever mean to me. I liked everyone but was simply unable to behave in the ways I had before. By the way, it was a Scarsvale custom in those days for young people to refer to all adults by the titles available then—usually, Mrs., Mr., or Dr. The only exception to this rule was Peter Law's father, who we referred to as "old man Law," not because he was old but because he was extremely cool in our eyes, or at least mine, since he always wore bluejeans and boots and was very casual around us. I think he worked in the TV industry and had a very different air from the staid deportment most Scarsvalian adults affected. He talked right to you in a casual manner, sprinkled with colorful slang.

Mrs. Gold was one of the best teachers I ever had. She was intelligent and very committed to her job. She was one of the few adults in those days that I thought actually cared about me. I don't think she was faking it either. I met her only one more time after eighth grade. We were outside a drug store that is now a bank in Scarsvale village. She stopped when she saw me and said, "Hello, Tommy" in the nicest way imaginable. She was still taller than me so I had to look up to her. I was probably in ninth grade then and still much under the weather from the operation. All I was able to do was look shyly at her, mumble some words, and turn away.

At some point in my life I developed the fantasy that Mrs. Gold would stand before our class and slowly, unconsciously unbutton a few buttons on her blouse as she gave her lesson. For years, I believed that she had actually done that but have since been told by others that she never had. She was well-endowed and strikingly beautiful, so I accept that I probably was fantasizing. I believe I was the only non-Jew in that classroom, another part of its experimental nature, I suppose. There were a couple of Jewish students at my elementary school, Edgemere, but I did not notice much of a distinction between Jews and non-Jews until I entered the Junior High. On my first day of sixth grade, the start of Junior High, I remember

seeing a great many students who seemed different from the kids at Edgemere. They were much better dressed and seemed happier and more animated than us. At Edgemere, the boys had mostly worn the kinds of clothes you could run and play in. The large group of Jewish students in the Junior High all wore much better clothes than that; they seemed dressed more like adults than kids.

One Jewish boy, Dan, was very striking to me on that first day. He was tall and conspicuously confident in a way I was not at all accustomed to. The Jewish girls, to my eye, were absolutely gorgeous, and doubly alluring for being slightly exotic and also dressed beautifully. I immediately felt the pull of a different culture as I observed those kids. As the days went by I noticed that they talked a lot and laughed often. It may have been clear to the teachers at the school that I had an affinity for Jews and that may be why I was placed in Mrs. Gold's class.

The theme of Jewish influence in Scarsvale, in the US, in my mom's life and in mine simply cannot be avoided if any semblance of truth is to be told in these pages. Before 1958, Jews—unofficially—were not allowed to own property in Scarsvale, though some did. At some point—again unofficially though with great consequence—the Scarsvale "council of ten," who basically ran the town, decided that Jews would be allowed into the village and many came. By 1962, when I started Junior High, the population of the town was about forty percent Jewish. Scarsvale is divided into smaller regions—Edgemere, Greenbriar, Heathrow, and Quaker Valley. Jews lived mostly in Heathrow and Quaker Valley, while Catholics and Christians lived in Edgemere and Greenbriar. At Edgemere, I tried making friends with a Jewish student, Mike, who was also always well-dressed, but his mom seemed suspicious of me or anyone I was with, so after a few play sessions, relations fizzled.

I knew next to nothing of my own ethnic background at that time. I just knew my name and my family and that I had a wonderful grandmother who was different from adults in Scarsvale. Still, I was capable of a glimmer of understanding that there exist cultures and subcultures of people, though I doubt I was aware of either of those concepts.

The "doctor" who operated on my eye was Jewish as was Fishburn, a dude who dumped my mom sometime before she met my dad.

"We were *engaged*," my mom told me one day when I was in high school and we were riding in the car on a drive back from Wosta, Massachusetts. "In my day that was the same as being *married*," she exclaimed.

"You just didn't *do* that back then and certainly not in the way *he* did it," she continued.

"What happened?" I asked.

"He wrote me a letter! Can you believe that? He wrote me a letter saying that *his mother* did not approve of us getting married because I was not Jewish. Can you believe that? His *mother!*"

Her contempt for having been dumped in a letter written by some guy who was doing as his mother wanted was too much for my mother. She stiffened with disgust in a way I had never seen before and never saw again.

"And the worst thing was the way he signed it."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He said he was moving to Boston and signed his name. Then he wrote 'PS: you're a great kid!' That was such an insult! It was cruel."

Her arms tensed as our car went under a stone bridge arched across the Merritt Parkway. Who can blame her for being pissed?

Of course, even the slightest alteration in the past would have caused a different sperm to enter the egg and I would not be here at all. But even still I considered the idea as we drove through the Connecticut landscape that I had almost had a Jewish dad.

From my mom's very strong emotions when telling me that story, I gather that Fishburn's mother had had a significant influence on how my mom herself had behaved as a mother. She was so revolted by what had happened and so blamed Fishburn's mom—though his writing that in his note may have been an excuse—that I think she developed a measure of contempt for motherhood itself, and maybe even for her eldest son, me, whom she did not want to see become another Fishburn.

We walked up the path away from the car and bushes toward the small building where Bob, the man my mom wanted me to meet, was expected to be. The most significant thing about that day was my mom's behavior. I had never known her to want to show me off or act in any way proud of me around other people. I am sure that her age and mild decline plus her discussion sessions with her friends had allowed deeper feelings to rise to the surface.

Bob was in a small public building in the nature center. There were large-print explanations about the center hanging on the walls. Bob seemed kindly but judgmental to me. He was a friend of my mom's from church and at least one of the reasons she wanted him to meet me became clear immediately. He was curious about Buddhism and was one of those rare people who found it genuinely interesting that I had studied Chinese and was currently engaged in translating Buddhist literature. When he asked some questions about the Dharma, his face brightened and his eyes became more lively as he looked at me through his round, wire-rimmed glasses.

"That's how I had understood it, but it's a hard concept to grasp, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," I said. "Even the concept of emptiness is empty."

We talked some more about grace in Christianity and parallels to it within the Buddhist tradition. "There is the importance of choice in Buddhism, but also a sense that the choice to do the right thing often is small while the consequences of it can be huge."

"It's not really us who decide, but God," he said. "The higher reality of the Buddha attracts us more than we decide to be attracted to it."

"That's a very good way to put it," I said.

As Bob and I talked, my mom stood to the side and beamed with pleasure. It was clear to me that she wanted to rehabilitate the dubious reputation I had among her friends in Scarsvale. I had left town for a private school at sixteen and had never gone to the church again after that.

The three of us talked for a while longer about California, flowers, and the grounds we were on. Bob seemed more friendly and less judgmental when we left and my mom was very pleased. "There," she said as we got back into the car. "I wanted them to see how you really are." I noticed her use of *them* and could tell that she looked up to Bob and that what I had sensed as his being judgmental was more likely

an indication of his status at the church and the way he carried himself around my mother. Both he and my mom were gentle, kind, and intelligent people, if mildly austere and unapproachable. That generation was always difficult for me since the society they belonged to was more structured and hierarchical and less inclusive than the one I had shared with friends as a child or lived in after I left Scarsvale.

My mom became tired and slightly confused as we drove home. I asked if she wanted me to take the wheel and after a short while she agreed that maybe I should. I don't believe she ever drove that far away from home again. In retrospect, I am honored that she undertook that journey largely to rehabilitate my reputation in Scarsvale, though I doubt she was successful. I've been a black sheep for so many years, I wouldn't know how to be anything else if I tried.

Chapter Four

The next two years passed uneventfully in my mom's life and in my understanding of her. She had clearly become older and weaker than before her fall but her condition seemed more or less stable. Her cognitive decline had leveled off and she much resembled her old self, though with a poorer memory and less capacity for long conversation or extensive reasoning.

"Well, I don't know about that," she might say before dropping a subject that was getting beyond her reach. She still read *The New York Times* daily and could discuss most of the stories in the news at a basic level. She was well-aware that George Bush was president and that 9/11 had been a significant national event.

I complained about Bush to her one day when I was home and she defended him. "I think it's a hard job for whoever is in that office," she said, placing her newspaper firmly on the kitchen table. I recognized that as a conversation closer and did not pursue the matter any further.

My mom's political views had always tended to be conservative though she could be very liberal in her social thinking and very tolerant. She had strongly held beliefs about herself and her family—that hard work, independence, and self-reliance are of paramount importance—but she was accepting of other opinions and rarely criticized them. She was OK with people having different values than hers, but would not even think of applying them to herself. She was interested in politics and history, but not deeply, and her understanding of those subjects matched her interests. In the past, I had teased her sometimes that she read *The New York Times* just to find out what to think. I can remember her sticking her tongue out at me in a playful but defensive way after a barb like that. "Nuts to you."

There was much truth in what I had said and I think she knew it. She was largely a follower of other people's opinions on national matters and unlikely to have a deeply independent view of her own, just the opposite of my father who had many independent views on many subjects.

He greatly disliked the IRS, thought that the FDIC would eventually lead to a massive scam, disliked war, and was very able to see many points of view on most subjects. When vice-president Spiro Agnew resigned for having taken some shady money, my father was visibly shocked. And when Nixon resigned over Watergate he was astounded. I think he believed that most people, surely most people in high office, were honest and deserved their positions, an attitude that seems exceptionally innocent to me today.

After my mom's fall, I stopped teasing her about *The New York Times* or confronting her about anything. The days when we might discuss issues like that were gone. She was still a good cook and still could turn out a very fine pan of lasagna, and that was more than enough for me.

One day we went to her favorite Chinese restaurant in Scarsvale's Wilmot Center.

The sight of her frail body entering the restaurant contrasted sharply with my memory of the last time I had followed her through those doors. A long dark mirror hung on the wall. I could see clearly both in the glass and in what was before me that my mom had declined physically much more than I had realized. Her knock-knees wobbled and she tottered as she made her way forward with the help of a cane.

Though we hadn't been in that restaurant for at least a year, the waitress who showed us to our table remembered me. She spoke a few words in Chinese, which I answered.

I was glad to see that she treated my mom with respect and that she waited patiently as my mom labored to fit herself into the booth. The waitress handed us our menus and left with a charming smile. She was quite beautiful and I was sort of flattered that she remembered me, though I doubt many of her non-Chinese customers spoke to her in Chinese.

Just as we were beginning to relax in our booth, I was presented with a another contrast—a second waitress, the waitress who would be taking our order, approached our table with stiffened shoulders and a pronounced scowl facing directly at my mom. She seemed conspicuously angry or disgusted with my mom. I wasn't sure if she looked that way because my mom was so old or because she had been forgetting to leave good tips. Either way, it was a sad sight to see and it made me realize how much the world she lived in had changed for her. Fortunately my mom noticed nothing and happily took up the menu while explaining to me what to get.

"The wonton soup is excellent," she said, peering toward me.

From across the table, in the soft light shining down on her and her menu, I noticed that she was growing a small mustache along with a few hairs on her chin. I made a mental note to speak to my sisters. My mom's skin appeared very tender and smooth though the major segments of her face were outlined with deep wrinkles, sharply accentuated by the light above her. Her pale blue eyes were cloudy and ringed with thin red lines of inflammation. She was still in pretty good shape, but obviously entering the category of the very old. Was this what the waitress was seeing? Or was it my mother's obvious weakness that had prompted her look of contempt? I was shocked at how she had interacted with my mom and decided to leave a large tip to make future visits easier for her.

We ordered food and as we ate, my mom leaned toward me to say, "Tommy, you are different from other people."

"Yes, I am," I said.

"You don't own a house, you don't have children, and you have a very unusual job." She paused to look at me with more fondness than I expected. "But you are a very nice person!"

In her first statement, she mentioned the main ways I deviated from her ideal of how I should be but in her second she allowed that maybe that was OK after all. I was and am so accustomed to not being anyone else's ideal, her comments didn't bother me in the least.

"I guess your father and I did not teach you how to do those things. But for us… well, we just thought it was all so easy. We never had any trouble with any of those things."

I nodded.

"Your brother and sisters all have houses and kids., but not you…" Her voice trailed off.

"Mom, it's OK. I am enjoying myself and I feel fine. I don't even want a house because then I will have to stay in one place all the time."

"I guess," she said. "But what about children? Don't you want them?"

"Honestly, I have never met anyone I wanted to have them with. I would do it, but I just never met the right person."

She abruptly changed the subject. "When your father drove you to Wosta Academy for the first time, what did you do?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. Wosta Academy was the private school I went to at sixteen. It was in Wosta Massachusetts.

"Well, did you stop for lunch?" On trips to Wosta, where my parents had grown up and where my grandmother had lived, we usually stopped at a Howard Johnson's in Connecticut for lunch.

"Yes, we did."

"What did you talk about?"

"Nothing."

"*Nothing?* What do you mean, *nothing?*"

"We didn't talk at all."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk in the car?"

"No."

"Tommy, are you serious?"

"What do you mean? Why do you ask?" It was normal for my father not to speak for long stretches of time.

"I mean did you talk about *anything* the whole trip?"

"No. Dad only said one thing to me."

"Yes?"

"As we were leaving the school, which I thought was utterly depressing, he said: 'Well, you got in. Why don't you look alive? Me, I'm an eager beaver. When I get an opportunity like this, I make the most of it.'" A terrible feeling of foreboding came over me that day as we drove out through the gates of the school onto Providence Street. I looked at my mother.

"Is that all he said?"

"That's it."

"He told me he explained everything to you, so I never felt there was any need for me to say anything about it." Her look of confusion was a mix of shame in herself and rare disappointment in my father.

"And, there's something else, Tommy."

"What?"

"We didn't know that you were popular at school in Scarsvale. We just didn't know."

My eye operation had greatly damaged my social and academic life, but it had perversely made me somehow attractive to some people, especially some of the girls. I guess I projected a smoldering, sullen look that can seem romantic in a young face. I was completely miserable for years, but still I did alright in a few ways. I had also made friends with some of the Jewish boys in school. What my mom probably meant is my relations with my old friends, even those who lived close-by, had degraded completely. I was simply no longer the same and young humans recognize that and have no comprehension how to adjust or even that they should adjust. No one is at fault because no one knew.

"Oh, your father. Why didn't he tell me?" she said.

"Why did you send me there?" I asked for the first time in my life. "What was the reason?"

"Tommy, it was a long time ago. We thought you were not doing well at the high school and that a change would be good for you."

An example of how school in Scarsvale went for me after the operation—and probably an indication of why my parents sent me to private school—came in eighth grade. Shortly after the bandages came off my eye, my gym teacher, Coach Rathbone, came up to me on the field one day and said," You know, Tommy, you used to be a very good athlete."

I looked at him silently, expecting I knew not what.

"But you can't do anything anymore." Coach Rathbone started laughing. He had a heavy brow and strong teeth. As he laughed out loud he continued, "Since you had that operation, you can't do a thing."

I felt a surge of hope as he looked down at me that he knew of some way to help me regain what I had been. But instead he said, still laughing out loud, "That doctor is great! What's her name?"

"Mountebank," I said.

"Oh, ha ha ha. Great doctor!" he said in parting. Then he walked away from me across the grass.

By the way, I learned the word *mountebank* from reading, so in my mind it is pronounced with a flat American accent in two evenly paced syllables—*mount bank*—not the way the dictionary says it should be pronounced.

When my mom took me to that "doctor," it was Munchhausen meets Mountebank. And when that happens, Munchhausen—or Munchhausen's proxy—is the one that gets hurt. The two of them had complimentary needs and desires. I was a pawn in a game I knew nothing about. Another way of putting this is there are three kinds of people in the world—cats, mice, and mice with toxoplasmosis. Mice with toxoplasmosis, a parasite that invades the brain, not only lose their fear of cats, they are actually attracted to them. The mice pick up the parasite from cat feces. My mom was a mouse with toxoplasmosis while "doctor" Mountebank was a cat. Coach Rathbone was nothing more than a lowly piece of shit in a litter box, but from that incident you can see that he was marginally affiliated with a network of cats. His small sense of degenerate pride was fully invested in that network.

Cats like "doctor" Mountebank are violent psychopaths playing a game that mice with toxoplasmosis cannot comprehend. Some mice come to understand, but they have to be cured of toxoplasmosis first.

Most people in the world are mice with toxoplasmosis. My entire family are mice with toxoplasmosis, though my father had a glimmer of understanding and one or two others seem to sense something once in a while. I, too, am a mouse, but I have been cured of toxoplasmosis, surely in part because of "doctor" Mountebank. How do I know that Mountebank was a psychopath? She spoke to me as she clawed my eye.

As Rathbone retreated from me to return to his litter box, I looked around at a sea of green grass that became almost hallucinatory in the bright sun of an early autumn afternoon. I still did not fully comprehend what had happened, why my "coach" would take such pleasure in my debility or how he might be connected to Mountebank. I still felt—and here's the toxoplasmosis at work—that since he was my "coach," he was going to help me somehow. Somehow he had a plan and he was going to help me get back to where I had been before being clawed by Mountebank. I had actually liked Rathbone and continued to try to be in his good graces for two more years. That is the definition of a mouse with toxoplasmosis. It's not Stockholm syndrome. It's worse.

Scarsvale is and was a special place because it houses a lot of cats. Many of the cats in Scarsvale are actually mice, but they believe they are cats and act like them. Just because someone is a mouse doesn't mean they don't fight and play dirty. Mice can be very nasty, too, unless they have toxoplasmosis and are around cats. Then they act all nice because they need the approval, the money, or the power that cats, with great calculation, offer them.

Before the year was through, I was humiliatingly downgraded in my boy scout troop as well. I don't blame any of those people because they had no way of knowing what had happened to me. All they saw was newfound awkwardness, incompetence, and probably sullenness in my behavior.

The most difficult paradox of life is that we are what we are because of what has happened to us and that if any of it had been different we might not be here at all. Rathbone and Mountebank showed me that people can act out of motives that have nothing to do with the people they harm. Because of them, I began—slowly—to comprehend that there exist massive divisions between people, between individuals and between groups. I did not fully understand any of this at the time, but the experience of this division and the emotions necessary for understanding it began then.

Chapter Five

There is another cat that clawed my world. I was about ten at the time and very good friends with a boy from an Irish-American family. He was one of my favorite friends when I was a kid. His Catholic education had stimulated a wonderful religious imagination in him. One night, while he slept over at our house, he described hell to me as he had learned it in church. There was fire, devils, steep walls of hot black rock, and naked people wailing and crying as they marched along paths that went nowhere. I asked what you had to do to get sent there. I was expecting him to describe horrible murders or treason to the nation. But he said, "Almost anything. If you swear even once without confessing it to a priest, you will go to hell."

I was stunned. We swore quite often when out of earshot of adults. It didn't seem like we were doing anything bad. He interpreted my silence as protest, I think. "Well, maybe not just *one* word, maybe you need more. And it's different for you because you are not Catholic."

"So do *you* tell the priest if you swear?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I don't like to do it, but I have to. There is a special way you have to say it. It's not as bad as you think." He then went on to describe confession and how the confession booths worked. I was overwhelmed by his descriptions and by the sense that he lived by rules I knew nothing about and had beliefs I could barely understand.

"The priests sound scary," I said.

"Some of them are. You just have to do it in the right way and it's not so bad."

We were lying on the floor in the dark in sleeping bags in a room paneled with pine. Our house had been built in 1907, but the pine paneling and the cedar closets behind it still emitted a woody odor. My reactions to his words seemed to make my friend feel defensive, so he softened some of what he had said.

"I'm not really sure about it," he said in a milder tone. "Maybe you don't go to hell for swearing and there's some ways you can get out of it, but I'm not sure how that works."

At the time I did not know that both my mother and father's parents had been lapsed Catholics. My mom's father was not a believer though the family attended services on major holidays, while my father's mother simply got tired of giving money to the church. By the time my parents settled into life in Scarsvale, they had transformed themselves into Congregationalists, a dilute version of Catholicism, if you will. I have had many Catholic friends and I always admire their imaginations and their sense of the depth of life, even if they no longer believe. I think my mom may have harmed her imagination by leaving the church. Catholicism is a deep culture as well as a religion and she may have lost more than she realized by moving into a different tradition. She told me that when they first moved to Scarsvale she considered becoming either a Mormon or a Christian Scientist. Sometimes I entertain the thought that if she had become a Christian Scientist, I never would have been exposed to Mountebank. Though my father had more spiritual feeling than my mother, my mom needed a well-defined culture—a church—far more than him.

Till the day she died, she kept a small religious display—almost a shrine—on the wall just outside her bedroom on the second floor. She had images of the Virgin Mary and a collection of rosary beads that had belonged to my father's mother arranged around an oval mirror. I saw her small shrine every time I went up to or down from the third floor, where my bedroom was. In late afternoon, the sun would stream through a window on the stair landing and ricochet off the mirror while illuminating the images

on the wall. The wallpaper behind this small display had a gold background with white birds perched on white ornaments. As the years went by, this wallpaper—which covered the walls of the stairs and hallways of our house from the first floor to the third—would slowly fade and become worn from being groped near light switches or grabbed on corners where children's hands had used the wall to assist their running turns.

My mother painted, quite poorly, did sculpture, a little better, and flower arrangements very well. She also sang in the church choir and gathered wildflowers for drying and mounting in frames, which she did with great sensitivity. It sometimes seemed that she was seeking in art the deep aspects of life that she had abandoned by leaving the Catholic church. She was the type of American of her generation that sought to define herself on what she conceived of as American terms—not Catholic, not too religious, not too political, not too opinionated; someone who participated in well-defined, socially approved activities such as dancing, dinner parties, social drinking, working at the church and Woman's Club, and being a homemaker.

The subject of religion may have arisen with my friend as we lay on the third floor due to my mom's small shrine on the second floor. I am sure he must have noticed it during one of the many times he was in our house. I am to this day still delighted with the memory of him describing hell and the afterlife as he understood it. But there was another subject, actually quite hellish, that we might have done better to discuss. This other subject involved an infamous graduate of Scarsvale High School who quit Harvard and returned to Scarsvale to start a local paper, only to get arrested for abusing young boys. The boys in question were me and my friend. The man was Peter Citron, who died in 2003.

In those days, when I was ten, I knew nothing about sex and had no idea that what Citron did, mostly to my friend, was either sexual or wrong in any way. What used to happen was this: Kelly and I might be walking in Scarsvale Village and Citron would drive up to us and ask if we wanted to go for a ride. We usually hopped in, though neither of us liked Citron at all. We got in the car because we each thought that the other wanted to. That's how kids are, a mix of feeling and ambiguous social understanding. I thought Kelly enjoyed the rides and he thought that I did. What would happen in the car was before long Citron, laughing all the way, would grab my friend's crotch and squeeze. Kelly always sat in the front while I sat in the rear. Kelly would squeal and half-laugh and more than half-complain. From the backseat, it was difficult for me to fully appreciate what was going on. I don't know if anything else happened than what I saw in the car, but the last time we rode with Citron, Kelly made me sit in front. I thought Citron didn't like me very much, so at first I was sort of pleased that he reached over to grab my crotch. Within seconds, it didn't feel right at all. His grabbing hurt and was nothing like friendly wrestling or a playful crotch-grab we boys might have done once in a while.

I complained loudly and Citron stopped. Then he unzipped his pants and asked me to grab him. Being as innocent as I was, I had no idea what was going on. I looked over at his crotch and saw filthy underwear, stained with urine and/or other bodily fluids. No other part of his body was visible except a fold of his pale, hairy belly. I expressed revulsion by saying something like "Gross!" while recoiling by pressing up against the car door.

Citron zipped up his pants while Kelly stared at me knowingly from the backseat. Shortly, we were let out of the car. "See what I mean?" Kelly said as we walked briskly away from where Citron had let us off, a block away from Kelly's church, the Immaculate Heart of Mary. "He does that every time!" My friend was more disturbed than I was, I think because he better understood that what Citron was doing was wrong. I honestly had no idea what had happened to us or how society viewed behavior like that.

Eventually, Kelly's mother reported Citron to the police and a case against him was begun. Not long after that, I was riding in the car one evening with my mom and dad. It was dark outside and inside the car. We were driving on Alida Street, which was very near to Kelly's home, when my father turned his head toward the backseat where I was sitting and asked if I knew anything about Peter Citron. I had heard something about the law case from Kelly but still did not understand the situation at all. My memory is that I said, after more prompting from my father, "I think that he was arrested for being a homosexual." My father sort of grimaced with satisfied anger while my mom clucked a bit from her place in the passenger seat. "OK," my dad said. "Let's just forget about it then." My mom clucked again and sighed quietly in a serious way that I had never heard before. I was embarrassed but pleased that my parents were showing such a deep response to my words.

We drove around some more and then went to get ice cream. It is likely that we initially were going to go over to Kelly's to speak with his mom about the case against Citron, but I do not know for sure about that. One day, sometime later, Kelly met me and expressed disappointment that I was not doing anything about the Citron case. Since I truly did not understand what was going on or what a case like that meant, I did not have a good reply for him. I did not understand that Kelly's testimony, and potentially mine, was the main evidence against Citron. Nor did I understand that without my testimony, the case against Citron was dropped. Apparently, the word of Kelly alone was not enough to go forward with it. I may have some of the details about this wrong, but I think that is essentially what happened. Today, I can easily understand how and why Kelly was much more traumatized by the whole thing than I had been. His mom made it into a prominent event while my father decided to ignore it.

At that time, I also did not understand that most kids could and did talk openly to their parents about what was happening in their lives, including matters involving people like Citron. I never at any time ever spoke about anything of personal seriousness with either of my parents. Before long, Kelly and I drifted apart. I think he must have thought that I had let him down in ways I was entirely unequipped to understand.

The greatest harm Citron did me was ruining my friendship with Kelly while implanting in me a sense of mistrust for men who smiled at me. Otherwise, I pretty much completely forgot about the whole thing and barely ever thought about it again until decades later when I saw a YouTube video called *Conspiracy of Silence: The Franklin Cover-up*. The video is about a well-organized group of child molesters in Omaha, Nebraska. Citron figured prominently among them. Apparently he left New York after his case was dropped and had the right connections to eventually move to Omaha to work at the *Omaha World-Herald* newspaper as a columnist.

In the tale I told just above, I notice a slight contradiction. In an earlier chapter, I described my mom as saying she did not know what a homosexual was. In this story about Citron, she clucks at my saying he was a homosexual. I don't know how to resolve that. Maybe I said something other than "homosexual." Maybe I did say "homosexual" and my mom did not know and did not ask, though she knew something serious was happening. Maybe she thought I didn't know what a homosexual was either, which I did not at that age. Whatever the case, Citron clearly was a cat from Scarsvale. He preyed on the innocent and continued to do so even after being caught. If you can find the time, please check out the video *The Franklin Cover-up*. I find it easy to accept that most of it may very well be true. People like Citron and Mountebank get away with what they do because most people have no idea anyone could be that bad. *The Franklin Cover-up* deals with many other people, even worse than Citron.

Another memory I have of Citron is years later I learned that he had been sent to jail. At the time I learned that, I thought that he had been sent to jail for what he had done to Kelly and me. Citron *had* been sent to jail, but it was because of what happened in Omaha, not Scarsvale. I know that sounds murky, but life can be cloudy sometimes and I heard about his being in jail only in passing. After I mislearned that, whenever I thought of Citron afterward, which was rarely, I usually felt sorry for him because I never considered he had done anything all that bad. It had seemed like nothing to me, though in retrospect I can see that the mistrust it engendered in me, especially when augmented by Mountebank, has not been a good thing. I have mistaken a friendly smile many times as a sign of veiled badness and many times I have displayed coldness toward people who were honestly well-disposed toward me as I had once thought Citron, Mountebank, and even Rathbone had been, though they were not.

Since seeing *The Franklin Cover-up,* I have come to wonder if Citron was connected to Mountebank and Rathbone. Were they part of a group like the Franklin group? Was there more to either of those groups than "just" the sexual abuse of children? Were they local tendrils of a larger secret society that specializes in political and social control and that uses sex abuse and Satanism as entry requirements and a means to conceal its real purpose? A member of such a group will be bound to it by the crimes they have committed. And any child abused by it will not be believed if gruesome imagery and behavior is part of the story.

One warm day in Spring during or shortly after the Citron incidents, I came home from Edgemere school and found my mother not there. This was very unusual as it was her habit to always be home when we got back from school. None of my other siblings was at home either. The back door was open. I called to my mom but heard no answer. Her car was in the driveway. I thought it quite strange that she was not there, but I was not alarmed. Before going to look for her, I opened the refrigerator to get something to drink. There was a glass of orange juice on the second shelf. I grabbed it and brought it to my lips to take a swig. The moment the juice touched my mouth, I gagged and reeled toward the sink to spit it out. I looked again at the glass and saw that it was not juice at all but liquid bacon grease. I couldn't believe that I had made such a mistake.

Coupled with my mom not being there, the experience of drinking from that glass felt surreal.

I was disoriented as I looked again at the open back door and decided that I had better go search for my mom. I called a few more times on the first floor but heard no answer. I then went up to the second floor and entered the master bedroom that she and my father shared. At the back of the bedroom there was a small dressing room and connected to that was a small master bathroom. I went into the dressing room and saw that the bathroom door was closed. I called to my mom and heard her answer in a quiet though very uncharacteristically distressed tone to "please leave me alone for a minute, Tommy… I'll be down soon…"

I have no other memories of that day except a very strange feeling about it and a vague recollection of my mom being frightened when she at last came downstairs. She seemed to be exerting extra energy to keep herself under control. I wondered then and I wonder now what had happened? Was the mistaken "juice" and her co-occurring distress just a coincidence? Had someone been inside and done something to my mom? Had Citron or people connected to him gone into our house? The wildly mind-altering drug BZ was available in those days and was being tested by the military. The scary thing about BZ is it can be administered through an odorless aerosol spray. I know this will sound far-fetched to some readers, but consider what happened in the Franklin case or what we now know about the MKULTRA program that was being conducted inside the US at the time. Could Citron have been associated with

people who had access to MKULTRA information and techniques? I am sorry that years later I never asked my mom about that day. And I am sorry that I never asked Kelly—who I lost touch with long ago—if anything like that had happened at his house.

Chapter Six

Kelly's father had killed himself when Kelly was very young by jumping in front of a train at the south end of the Scarsvale Station passenger platform. While Heidi and I were living in Scarsvale taking care of my mom (this eventually came to pass), a high school student jumped in front of a train in almost the same place. Scarsvale is one of the wealthiest communities in the US and anyone driving through it must surely admire the many fine homes and manicured yards. Wealth, of course, does not buy happiness. Suicides happen in Scarsvale, too, and sometimes with alarming frequency. In the same year that the high school student jumped onto the train tracks, eleven other people in Scarsvale killed themselves, a total of twelve in a town of roughly twenty thousand souls. I read that suicide figure in an article in the *Scarsvale Inquirer*, the local paper, over the kitchen table in our house on Circle Road while Heidi and I were preparing dinner for my mom one evening.

One of the twelve suicides was another high school student who died of a deliberate drug overdose in Hyatt Field. Hyatt Field is very close to the house my family first moved into in Scarsvale in 1950. My father liked that location—Lee Road—because it was close to Hyatt Field and the neighborhood was not expensive. I believe he envisioned his children spending a lot of time playing on Hyatt Field, though in truth we did not use it very often because it had been made on low ground and the soil frequently was very damp, if not soaking wet. The house my father grew up in in Wosta Massachusetts was across the street from a large open field with baseball diamonds and a shallow wading pool that I played in whenever we went there in the summer.

While we were living on Lee Road, when I was about five years old, I was good friends with a boy who lived down the street—closer to Hyatt Field—though his house was one street over from ours, on Brambach Road.

The garage to his house, in those days, was a separate building that fronted on Lee Road. You could get to his house from Lee Road by going through a door at the back of the garage and walking up a short hill. But there was also a very narrow foundation wall along one side of the garage with a drop-off of about four feet into the neighbor's yard. It was along the top of this narrow wall that we usually went to get to either of our houses.

We considered it a great challenge to walk from one end of the wall to the other without falling into the neighbor's yard. We used to press our backs against the side of the garage and edge carefully from one end to the other trying not to fall. It was hard to do for the first few months of our friendship and we fell many times. But as time passed, we improved a great deal and used to do tricks while edging along the wall. We would hand things to each other, turn partly around, or wave our hands out as far as we could from our bodies. In Autumn, his neighbor raked a large pile of leaves into the area at the bottom of the wall and we climbed onto the roof of the garage and jumped down into those leaves. We never did any flips, but we would sometimes land dramatically on our sides or backs. No one was concerned that we were in any danger of being poked by a stick or some other solid object in the pile.

My friend's name was Brett and we played together often. I usually went to his house because it was much bigger than ours and because he had a wonderful collection of toy soldiers that we spent hours arranging in different battle configurations. His mother was very pretty, as I recall, and very friendly,

though I do remember a note of deep sadness in her. She often made lunches for us and would bring them to the room where we were playing. It was truly an innocent and ideal world that the two of us shared and Brett's mom played a major role in having it be that way.

The reason I am telling this story is at some point, and I cannot remember my age, Brett's father committed suicide.

Brett and I were playing with his toy soldiers one afternoon when his mom came upstairs and said I had to go home now and that she and Brett were going for a drive.

Even as a child, I could tell that she was beside herself with some incomprehensible distress. I went downstairs with her and Brett for her to let me out the back door. As we passed through the kitchen, she drew back from the door leading down to their basement. "I'm not going down there," she said to the room and to us as much as to herself. "I just cannot handle that." There were elements of disgust, fear, dismissal, and individual resolve in her manner and tone. I went out the back door to go home.

Sometime later, I learned that Brett's father had died. I am pretty sure my mom also told me that he had killed himself or died tragically. I learned much later that he had shot himself in the basement while we were upstairs playing. Brett's mom had heard the shot and guessed what had happened. Apparently, it took some time for him to die. At some point just after the event, my mom told me not to go over to Brett's any more. I asked why and she replied that she didn't want me to be involved with "that situation." I missed my friend greatly, but was far too young to disobey my mom. I think I only saw him one more time before he and his mom moved away to live with her parents. He was very downcast and looked toward me bleakly with great shame and sadness. "Oh, Tommy," was all he said. I know he must have felt that I, just like his father, had abandoned him.

I clearly remember walking near his house with the vague hope that I would see him and believe we had that brief encounter then. Neither of us understood very much about what had happened, but both of us knew that we, and others, had experienced a huge loss. I did not know what to say or do when I saw him. We looked at each other across a gulf we could not comprehend.

My mom dealt with the incident in the way she dealt with many things—she tried to ignore it and move on. That is a "skill" that is learned only through bitter experience. It very much depends on when, where, and why it is applied to be called a valuable skill. For my mom, it was part of her almost innate stoicism. For me, her son, at that time, it tore a major hunk out of my breast. In a matter of days, I was forced to entirely dissociate from all the fond memories and friendly feelings I had developed with Brett. Of course, the main cause for everything was Brett's father. But as they say in Japan, and what happened before that? Why did he kill himself? I have heard since that he was being bullied or ostracized at work or in his social circle and that he was taking his mistreatment very badly. Men in those days could be horrible to each other, and suburban New Yorkers were no exception; in fact they were probably leading the pack.

I do remember one day shortly before his death seeing him in their kitchen. He looked down at me with a pained, confused expression and said aloud to his wife, "You see, even *he* doesn't respect me." God knows what I had done, if anything. I remember feeling very small and quite terrible that he had said that. Now that I am older, I wonder how could a grown man derive such intense feelings from the expression or manner of a five year old? I know I liked him, his wife, and his son; they were as ideals to me. I suppose his reaction and words were part of his gathering agony.

I don't agree with the way my mom handled that event because Brett and I both had profound needs that should have been addressed. Even still, in those days, in the middle of the 1950s, what else could she have done? She was not close friends with Brett's mother. Could she have gone over there with me to have some sort of emotional healing session? I really doubt that would have been at all possible back then. And yet, still, I have always wished that Brett and I could have remained friends. In some ways, it may be that he recovered more quickly and better than me because he surely had more chances to deal with the matter than I did, and he moved away from our town. For me, something colorful, wonderful, and lively simply disappeared overnight.

My mom had another reason to deal with Brett's father's death in the way she did—though I did not know it at the time, my father's father had killed himself about fifteen years before Brett's father. His death was a subject that was never discussed anywhere near my father and only tangentially and on rare occasions among the rest of us. I suppose my mom had learned from living with her husband that suicide was a topic that is best dealt with in silence, even ignored.

During that year of twelve suicides in Scarsvale while Heidi and I were caring for my mom, one of them distressed me greatly. There were several articles in the *Scarsvale Inquirer* about it. I don't want to offend anyone by going into detail, but I think the whole town must have been deeply affected. The death occurred in a body of water to a doctor who seemed to have it all. She drove there and waded into the cold water to drown. The sadness and finality of her suicide touched me for many reasons, but especially because my grandfather—my father's father—had drowned himself in Lake Quinsigamond, near his home in Wosta, Massachusetts.

It may be that due to my grandfather's suicide, both of my parents came to deal with personal suffering and emotional distress by ignoring it. And it may be that this tendency morphed into their ignoring not just personal suffering, but persons themselves; and not just emotional distress, but emotions themselves. I am not saying my parents were uncaring or unfeeling people, but they largely ignored the details, and much of the fun, of interpersonal relations.

I adored, even worshiped, my father when I was very young, and he generally reciprocated with humor and good feeling. I can remember following behind him as he cut the grass in our yard with a manual push mower. And when I grew big enough, I remember pushing the same mower with all my might. My mom, watching me do that or perform other blatant imitations of my father, sometimes would say with a slightly derisive, teasing laugh, "Tommy, you're just imitating your father!" As an adult, I have wanted to reply to her that that's what little boys do, but of course I can't go back and change her reactions after the fact. At the time, when I was young, those kinds of comments were profoundly confusing as they disoriented me right in the center of my being.

Where my mom got that kind of reaction to her own child doing the most normal thing in the world, I don't know, but she had a few other "opposite" ways of expressing herself toward me. For example, she might accuse me of doing something I hadn't done to prevent me from doing it in the future. No matter how much I protested that I hadn't done it, she would continue to look sternly at me, just to be sure. If she cooked something that I really liked and I told her, she might never cook it again. By the time I was eight years old, or so, I had learned to be careful about what I said or did around her. I was never afraid of her, but I knew that if I went straight toward something, I might never get it. Or if I expressed some feeling or insight, she might contradict me in a very strange way.

During those early years on Lee Road—we moved to Circle Road in 1959—I think my mom may have doubted her capacity to be a good mother, or to love and be loved by her children, or at least by me. I doubt she understood that small children normally focus on one parent at a time or that small boys want

nothing more than to be clones of their fathers.

When I was around four, I spent some time with a girl of the same age who lived down the street. We were good friends during the course of one summer and into the fall. One day, on the side of the road, she showed me what was under her shorts. Though I had taken many baths with my sisters, I had never gotten such a good look at what was down there. It gave me a strange feeling but we quickly forgot about it and did other things. Well, some weeks later—on Halloween—the girl's mother called my father about that incident. I think she did this after I had gone to her house for candy with my sisters. I learned much later that she had only been wanting to open a discussion with my father, and may even have been attracted to him; that's what I heard.

At the time, my mom was away in Massachusetts because her father had just died of a heart-attack while loading hay into a truck at their summer home in Massachusetts. I understood little about that and was probably told almost nothing. All I knew that evening was that my mom was away and that Halloween on our small street was the most amazing thing I had ever seen. I was transported by the costumes, candy, and the way people's homes were decorated. Every door held a surprise and delight. I had never seen adults laugh so much or act so funny and was amazed that everyone was giving us candy and that there were kids all around enjoying the evening as we were. My sisters and I traveled in a group. We went down one side of the street and came back up the other. Our house was near the center of that section of Lee Road. As my sisters and I came back up the street, my father called to me to come inside. We were just getting ready to go to my friend Gordon's house. I wanted to keep going to houses for candy, but did as he asked. Inside the house, he became angry with me and said something about the girl down the street and that I shouldn't have looked inside her shorts.

I know now that he was drunk and that he had misunderstood what the girl's mother had meant by calling him. In his confused state, he determined that he needed to punish me. He made me put out my hands while he struck them with a ruler. That was the most painful experience of my life to that point. I howled in agony which was intensified by the garish evening and the angry demeanor of my father. Eventually he stopped, and I held my hands under cold water running from a bathroom faucet for a long time. He came in once or twice and told me it couldn't hurt that much, but I was overwhelmed. I leaned on the sink shifting from leg to leg in sheer agony. He came into the bathroom again and tried to comfort me by putting Vaseline on my palms. The memory of that kindness is very weird because I only needed the Vaseline because he had wielded the ruler.

Later that night after I had gone to bed and my sisters were upstairs in their room, my father—again I learned this later—went down the street visiting all the houses on the block. He was quite drunk and asked for a shot of booze at every door. I am not sure how much he drank, but it must have been a good deal.

What caused him to feel that way, to get so drunk and hit me, I suppose I will never know. To his credit, he swore off drinking hard booze the next day and remained a moderate beer drinker for years until he switched to moderate wine and scotch drinking. I never saw him drunk again or heard of him being drunk.

Anyway, the main point of this story is that when my mom returned from her sad journey to Massachusetts a few days later, I was deeply miserable and downcast from what had happened on Halloween. I shrank back when she came in the door and did not go to greet her. My mom, sadly, understood none of this and thought that I had not missed her. For my part, I assumed that she would understand what had happened. I kept trying to forget the incident, to put it out of my mind, but was unable to do so. My hero had beat the crap out of me. I had no way of understanding. Since my mom

believed that I hadn't missed her, she grew a bit cold toward me. At the time, I knew nothing about alcohol and the effects it can have on people and I knew nothing about how serious misunderstandings between people can be.

"Tommy, didn't you miss me?" my mom asked after she came in the door. She couldn't read my mind and I couldn't read hers. I doubt my father ever told her what had happened, though she did learn of this incident later in life, probably from one of my sisters who had heard the story from me.

She brought it up with me one day when she was in her eighties, after she had started having the sessions with her friends. She apologized to me for not understanding and explained how much her father's death had affected her. She also said that my father had quit drinking distilled beverages at that time though she had not known why. She explained that he had been under a lot of stress and that he had probably just lost it. I had no reason to disagree and have no resentment toward anyone over those events. I don't remember clearly now where I had this conversation with my mom—I think it was in our kitchen at Circle Road—but I do remember us both expressing sadness at how there are so many misunderstandings in life. As we talked, she told me that she thought that her father had probably tried to have a heart-attack and that that was why he was loading hay when he died on his farm.

I asked her why and she said that he had been unhappy for years. He was only fifty-eight when he died. I remember him visiting us on Lee Road, but only vaguely. I sat on the couch between him and my grandmother, his wife.

"You do remember him?" my mom asked.

"Yes, I do, but only vaguely," I said. "He seemed very nice to me."

"Yes, he was nice. He was a very gentle man. He read a lot. They did visit when you were small, so you probably do remember him."

"What did you do with the farm they had in Massachusetts?" I asked.

"Oh Tommy, I don't want to tell you… but I sold it to a neighbor for practically nothing."

"Where was it exactly?"

"I can't tell you that… you would kill me if you knew where it was."

I had lived in New Hampshire for a while near my sister and my mom knew that we both very much enjoyed rural New England and its many old farms. "It was not far from where you were in New Hampshire. I wish I had held onto it. You would have loved it."

I told her it didn't matter that she had sold it. Those things happen. She looked sad but agreed there was nothing we could do now. I asked again where it was but she would not say.

There were many happy times on Lee Road. I spent long days playing with my very good friend, Gordon, who lived directly across the street from us. We chased bumble bees in the summer and waded in the snow in the winter. We climbed an old crab apple tree in our yard. Our house, which was painted red, had once been a small church and that entire neighborhood had once been an apple orchard. The crab apple tree Gordon and I climbed was very likely a descendant of the apple orchard that dated back to the nineteenth century.

One day, before I had entered school, I was standing in our driveway watching kids walk home from school. I had a small knife my father had given me and was playing with it. A boy, much larger than me, that I had never seen before came up to me and said, "Give me that knife, kid, or I will cut your gizzard out."

His statement perplexed me even at the time, for how could he cut my gizzard out if I didn't give him the knife? Nonetheless, I did give him the knife. He grinned, closed it, stuck it in his pocket, and quickly strode away.

I went inside and told my mom what had happened. All she said was, "Well, why did you give it to him?" I had no answer and there was nothing I could do about it. I waited for days for that boy to come down the street again, but he never did and I never saw that knife again.

When I was around that same age, I cut myself pretty badly on a kitchen knife my mom was letting me use to whittle. The cut was hot and bleeding more than I had ever seen before. My father came home at just that moment and spoke sharply to my mother—"Why are you letting such a small child use that knife?"

"I thought he knew how to use it," my mom said defensively.

My dad bandaged my finger without saying a word. When he was finished he said, "That'll teach you to keep your fingers away from the blade. Always be sure you know where the blade will go if it slips, OK?"

I nodded. That experience helped me understand knives. In those days, most boys had pocket knives and learned to use them at a young age. We carried them wherever we went, including into classes at school. Knives were part of that world and no one ever was seriously hurt by them, far as I remember.

When we were living on Lee Road, I was still too small to be left alone at home, so my mom often took me shopping with her. I remember us frequently driving to the A&P on the Post Road. The same building is still there, not changed much at all, though today it is a Trader Joe's. My brother and I used to have fun playing with the shopping carts or running up and down the aisles. Across the street from the A&P was, and still is, a Lord & Taylor's, one of the first modern department stores built after World War II. It's still an interesting piece of architecture. I remember going in there with my mom, who I imagine felt very modern as she strode from her car to the entryway, which had long, beautifully polished brass handles set in heavy glass doors. The store was sleek and the displays and use of space was very elegant for the day. Once we got inside, though, I usually quickly became bored and felt tired because nothing interested me. It was all adult clothing and home supplies. My mom sometimes dragged me around to other stores to shop for clothes or look for fabrics. These outings became a real burden for me unless my brother was with us or one of my friends. The one place I did enjoy going shopping with her was to a nearby farm that sold vegetables. The vegetables were interesting and the people doing the selling were very friendly. That farm stayed in business a long time but was forced to close down in the 1980s due to changes in the economy.

When I was eight, we moved away from Lee Road to our much larger home on Circle Road. The two houses were not that far away from each other, but I gradually drifted away from my friend Gordon because it was much harder for us to meet up. On the day we moved, in early summer, the afternoon sky filled with clouds that exploded into a thunder storm that I found thrilling. I remember running up and down the stairs looking out every window as gusts of air billowed in and were sucked out of the house.

Rain splashed against the windows. I was really happy to be there and very pleased to have my own room on the third floor. The storm was especially wonderful because most of our furniture had not yet arrived, so the half-empty house seemed to breathe with its own being more than with ours.

Chapter Seven

On a visit home in the summer of 2003, I decided to stop eating any of the food in my mom's refrigerator unless I had bought it and put it there myself. The refrigerator was clean enough, but the provenance of the food had become uncertain.

My mom still drove once in awhile to Wilmot Center in Scarsvale to eat at the Chinese restaurant and buy food at Gristedes, but her trips were less frequent and she went nowhere else. My sister Carol had started helping her around the house and with shopping, checking in frequently to be sure she was well stocked and that bad food was thrown out.

I remember going into Gristedes with her on that trip home and being approach by a large female butcher who was curious about my mom. She inquired after her health and wondered who I was. As I looked toward my mom, who was several yards down the aisle and leaning on her cart for support, I realized that she appeared more confused and less able than she was among the familiar surroundings of our house on Circle Road.

I was glad that the butcher knew her and seemed to care about her. I suppose she had become a bit of a mystery woman at Wilmot Center. I told her that I was her son and that we were taking good care of her.

By 2003, most of my mom's friends were dead or housebound. She had only one friend left who socialized with her regularly. About once a month the two of them went to lunch together. Between times, they spoke on the phone.

This friend, Flo, was very gracious and called my mom on the phone with some frequency. For years, my mom also called her, but as time passed, their relationship slowly became one-sided, as Flo did more of the calling until she was the only one who initiated calls.

I remember answering the phone and hearing Flo's frail and gentle voice.

"Is this, Tommy?" I imagined her sitting in a room filled with her old things, probably using a rotary phone much like my mom's. "Yes, it is."

She would ask after me and we might talk for a minute or two and then she would ask if my mom were available. Both of them were getting very old but Flo was better able to keep the friendship going, to drive, and to plan excursions for lunch. I loved watching my mom brighten up and smile when she spoke with Flo. Her face would set and her body would hunch forward as she drew the receiver to her ear.

As time went on, my mom's communication style changed from listening and responding normally to more of a headlong declarative rush. She had been hard of hearing for years, and by now she was also having trouble keeping the elements of a conversation in place. To compensate, she would jump to something she was sure of as soon as she lost track of where the conversation actually was.

"Well, my son Tommy is here visiting," she might declare cheerfully for the second time as Flo attempted to set a time to pick my mom up for their lunch date.

In a few more years, I would hear my mom say to Flo, "Oh, Flo, that would be wonderful. Yes, I would love to go to lunch. Please call and let me know when you want to go."

Somehow she had become unable to understand that that was what Flo was doing just then.

I heard her speak to Flo like that a few times, but never had the heart to explain to my mom how she was mistaking Flo's intentions. Moreover, I wasn't sure if my mom would understand or be able to remember what I said, and I was also not sure of whether she was, in her own way, letting Flo know that she was not going to be available for lunch dates anymore. I was not spying on her during those calls—at least not much—because her phone voice had become quite loud to compensate for her poor hearing.

I tried a few times to convince her to get a hearing aid but she always declined. The last time I said anything about it we were seated in the living room.

She was on an old Edwardian couch that had been reupholstered decades before with a turquoise fabric that had tropical birds and flowers stitched into it. I had always liked that couch and took pleasure in seeing my mom seated on it. She was in her element—in her house on her couch which she had had reupholstered with fabric she had chosen.

Her head and shoulders were framed by the window behind her, which glowed with a dim light that came through the dusty glass and old lace curtains that hung before it. Her hands, characteristically, were drawn together and held gently in her lap.

"Tommy, I don't want a hearing aid," she said in reply. "I live in a very quiet world and I like it that way."

She spoke with conviction as she looked toward me, waiting for my expected objection.

But this time I said simply, "That makes good sense to me, mom. If that's how you want it, that's how it will be."

Her statement about the "quiet world" she lived in impressed me with its uniqueness and its clear reasoning based on experience. I vowed silently never to mentioned hearing aids again. When she saw that I had accepted her refusal, her face filled with an expression of almost wondrous recognition as if my agreement with her had placed us in the same private realm together.

As she beamed with pleasure at my understanding of her take on her hearing, I felt a deep bond with her for I was myself much reduced and unable to do many of the things I had done easily in the distant past and, like her, I enjoyed being accepted as I am without fear or favor, still alive, still in the world.

"Do you remember when we went to pick apples?" she asked, leaning toward me.

"Yes, I do." I said, struck both by the memory of the apples and by her bid to share that memory with me.

"You do? Was it fun for you? Did you enjoy doing that?"

"Yes, I did," I answered honestly. We used to go to an apple orchard about thirty minutes from our home in Scarsvale to pick bushels of apples that we would store outside on the cool back porch. As autumn progressed and the apples declined in freshness, my mom would make stewed apples and

apple pies for immediate consumption and apple sauce for canning. We also bought gallons of cider which my father fermented into an effervescent apple drink with a percent or two of alcohol. We were allowed to drink the cider if we didn't take too much and encouraged to eat all the apples we wanted.

"We used to eat so many apples! Do you remember the cider dad made?" I asked.

She did, and as we recalled more details we continued occupying the same mental or spiritual place. It was all gone now and both of us were vastly changed from those days, but for a time we shared the same feelings while invoking memories of my father without either of us becoming sad.

"You were such a lively boy," she said. "I'm glad you enjoyed that."

We both paused and looked around the room as if storing new memories for a future yet to come.

Chapter Eight

Life went along like this for my mom for the remainder of 2003. During the summer of 2004, I was unable to go home for a visit. We spoke often on the phone, and though she was forgetful and could lose track of a conversation, she was still doing pretty well. Both she and my sister Carol assured me that she was driving only short distances and only in the day along well-known routes.

Her voice was very clear and vigorous during those years. I remember telling Heidi more than once that she sounded like she was about forty years old, which was true. Her excellent vocabulary and command of the English language would stand her in good stead for the rest of her life. She could be very clever in saying what she wanted when a familiar word escaped her.

In the summer of 2005, my mom started calling me twice in a row on some days. She might call me at nine in the morning, for example, "just to say hello." But after hanging up, call me again within a few minutes "just to say hello" as if there had been no prior phone call. She only did this a couple of times a month, but it was an obvious sign that her memory was getting worse.

During the first part of 2005 and into the summer, my mom's habit of the last few years of giving things away to visiting family members grew stronger. Every time someone visited, she would ask them to take anything they wanted. She never said anything like "I am going to be dead soon, so we might as well start getting rid of things," but her actions implied just that.

Since I lived so far away and had not been home for some time, she had only offered to give me something once or twice, and I had declined. My feeling was that I wanted her and her house to stay the same as long as possible. I had no problem with others taking things from the house; I just didn't want to do it myself.

One day during the summer, I got a call from my sister Mira. She was very concerned that mom was giving away all of her stuff and that it wasn't fair. I told her that I didn't really care all that much and that the stuff did belong to our mother. "I know" she said, "but I think some people are taking advantage of her and going over just to get stuff."

It was true that my father's entire tool collection had disappeared over the years and that a good deal of what my mom owned had some monetary and considerable sentimental value. Still, I didn't really care very much and told that to Mira.

A few weeks later, I received a call from my other sister, Carol. She was upset and said that Mira and my brother had gone to the house and put red dots on the back of many of mom's possessions.

"What?" I asked. "Red dots?"

"Yes," Carol replied. "She had a bunch of little red stickers—about the size of a dime—and she and Pep went around putting them on things."

"Right on the things?" I asked.

"Well, on the backs or bottoms."

"What for?" I asked. "To claim them?"

"Sort of… seems she thinks that someone is stealing mom's stuff…"

Her voice trailed off. It was obvious to me that Carol was deeply offended because the only family members who could have been stealing from my mom, if that were even possible, were her or her grown children, my nephew and niece. I didn't for a second think that any of them would steal anything from my mom or receive something from her that was not an honest gift, to which they were more than entitled.

"Oh man," I said. "This is strange… the red dots sound macabre to me, almost ghoulish."

"That's what I thought," Carol said.

"The woman is still very much alive. What right does anyone have to do that? What if mom sees the dots?"

"I know," she said.

This incident was to cause a fairly major rift among my mom's children. Carol and I thought the dots had been a terrible idea, while Mira maintains to this day that it was a very good idea because it "let people know that maybe someone else wanted" whatever it was, a lamp, a painting, a piece of furniture.

I called Mira shortly after learning about the red dots, but she was unapologetic. "Tommy, you are living on the other side of the country. You don't understand what is happening here."

"OK, but mom is still alive. How can you do something like that? What if she sees the dots?"

"She won't," Mira replied.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because we put them on the backs and bottoms of things. She will never look there."

The whole idea seemed horrible to me and even reminded me of the black spot in *Treasure Island* that marked someone who was going to be killed.

"I don't like the idea at all, Mira. I think it was a mistake and also… it's an insult to Carol and her kids."

Mira told me who she thought was taking stuff and gave me a few more details. Her story seemed a little more reasonable, but I felt she was making a mountain out of a molehill. Supposedly, large families are infamous for fighting bitterly over stuff like this. I resolved to say what I thought but not to argue about it with Mira. Still, I wanted a bit more of the dirt. I am only human.

"How did you come up with that idea?" I asked.

"It's a brilliant idea," she said. "I just gave it some thought. We needed some way to stop the stealing without confronting anyone."

This was pure Mira. A forceful passive aggressive move that supposedly does not "confront anyone" or appear aggressive—until you think about it—but gets everyone upset.

"Yes…," I said, waiting for more.

"The dots occurred to me as a good way to mark stuff. Jacques and I drove down with Pep and we spent an evening sticking them on."

"Did mom see what you were doing?"

"No, we did it after she went to bed."

"I don't think that was a good idea," I said again. "I think it's a huge mistake. You are sort of lying to your mother and insulting Carol at the same time. It's not worth it."

It was a sunny afternoon in San Diego and I can still remember crossing the street, phone in hand, as I spoke with my sister.

In our family, loyalties frequently shift among us. If Carol were mad at Mira, then I knew she would draw closer to me. Pep and Mira were now closely allied over the red dots, but that could change. I felt strongly that Mira had made a mistake and told her as much, but said no more. It seemed best to let time pass while future events, then unseen, took their course. The red dots would stay and I would not interfere.

Mira had often said to me that my mom respected me more than her or my other siblings because I had always been able or willing to argue with her, even to fight back against her. She said it again as I gained the other side of the street and walked behind my apartment building.

"That's why she respects you more than us. She likes people who have the courage to talk back to her."

"I don't know, Mira," I said, genuinely not sure of what my mom thought of me or her other children. I had always thought that she was a classic traditional mother who pays the greatest attention to her oldest child, in our case Carol, with decreasing interest as her brood gets younger. "Maybe it's just because I am far away and she sees me less than you guys."

"No, I don't think so," she answered. "She doesn't respect the rest of us the way she does you. You should hear what she says about you when you are not around."

"Really, like what?" That was a surprising thing to hear and I was truly curious, especially since I had generally always felt somewhat alienated from both my mother and father. It's true that the three of us had some similar experiences—time spent in Wosta and consequent social isolation—and that each of us

was highly independent, but my mom had almost never praised me or encouraged me to do anything. My sense was that she had hardly ever spoken with me deeply until these last years of her life.

"Well, I am not going to go into that…" Mira replied.

I felt concern that I might be fostering sibling rivalry by talking on the phone so often with my mom, but what could I do about that? I demurred again. "Well, OK, Mira, but you may be seeing something that is not really there. Carol has always been her favorite child as far as I can tell."

"No, and it was the same with dad. During those last months he talked about you constantly."

I didn't bother to ask her what he had said because I had asked before and she never answered.

"Well, let's see if this latest thing will blow over," I said.

"You mean the dots?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It was a good idea, Tommy. Someone had to do something."

"OK," I said. "But let's leave it at that. If I speak to Carol again I will try to get her to see your point of view."

We spoke about other matters for a minute or so and hung up our phones. For many years, I had felt very close to Mira. She was my older sister, but close enough in age that we were also friends. I had always looked up to her and respected her a great deal, probably more than I should have. Mira saw a side of life my mom never did. She was imaginative, playful, and spontaneous to a fault where my mom, though quite imaginative, was hardly ever spontaneous and rarely playful. Mira could make you laugh just by the way she looked walking into a room, while my mom was never like that.

And who knows? Maybe Mira was right about the red dots after all because no one took anything more out of my mom's house after that. I had always very much favored the idea of my old mom contentedly staying in her old home as it always had been for as long as possible. After having lived with her during her last years, I also came to understand that the things she had accumulated and placed in that home were of fundamental importance to her mental and physical well-being. Keeping them in place surely added many hours, if not years, of pleasure and contentment to her life.

Chapter Nine

In the Fall of 2004, Heidi and I left San Diego to travel to Ukraine to visit my friend Jonathan, who was living in Odessa. I had left my translating job at the temple about a year before due to "artistic differences" with the administration and was looking for something else to do. Heidi and I both liked San Diego, but we were getting tired of the heat and had decided either to go to Ukraine for a few months or on a long road trip in the US and Canada. When our truck was stolen in August, we decided Ukraine was going to be it. I was able to be independent because I had an online translation business that was sufficient for our small needs.

We drove to New York in October, stopping at Heidi's mom's place in upstate New York for one night and then heading down to Scarsvale to spend a few days with my mother before going to Ukraine.

My mom seemed to be doing well enough for her age, eighty-eight, as far as I could tell. She was walking more slowly and with the help of a cane, but could still go up and down stairs without much trouble. I attributed a slight stiffness in her gait to old age and did not realize that it was actually probably an early symptom of the Parkinsonian motion problems associated with DLB. DLB is also characterized by wide shifts in awareness—sometimes the person is very aware and seems perfectly normal, while at other times they may look and act confused. I saw my mom in confused states from time to time, but optimistically assumed that she was just tired.

As mentioned, we will never know for certain if she even had DLB. And I guess it really does not matter what we call her condition during her last years. I want to tell her story as I understood it then and as I understand it now, but also want to avoid seeming that I know how it was for her or that I feel that if only I had understood about DLB early on, there was something we could have done, or anything like that because it really didn't make any difference what I understood or didn't understand about her condition. There was then, and still is at the time of this writing, no satisfactory treatment for DLB and even if there had been, I doubt my mom would have wanted it. Her health care statements were very clear—no extraordinary treatments, no hospitals, and no medications. She wanted to live out her life at home without interventions if at all possible.

Another symptom of DLB—its most telling one—is hallucinations and/or illusory thinking. During this short stay at home I noticed for the first time that my mom was engaging in "illusory thinking" about a non-existent street light in front of our house. She had mentioned this light to me several times over the phone while I was in San Diego and often had told me that she was waiting for it to go on. I must confess that even though I had grown up in that house and should have known there was no street light in front of it, I came to visualize one myself. During this trip home, it perplexed me mildly to discover that there actually was no street light and that my mom had been waiting for something that never was and would not be.

"Mom, there is no street light out front, I am sorry to say." I said this to her on my first evening home.

It was early December and the sun had set. We were sitting in the red room at the front of our house. Its window looked out on the front walk to the narrow quiet street beyond.

Since Circle Road was actually a semicircle with no side streets, cars went by only infrequently. The front walk was a slightly pinkish concrete that had probably been poured in 1907 when the house was built. The walk passed through a break in a tall row of yew bushes that followed the line of the street along the front yard.

From where my mom was sitting, just beyond a large oak tree that grew on the other side of the yews was a utility pole with electric and telephone wires strung on it. My mom believed that the street light was on that pole though hidden from her view by the trunk of the oak tree. She rubbed her bottom lip with some pressure as she stared intently in the direction of the pole.

"Yes, there is, Tommy. Just wait and it will go on."

I explained again that there really was nothing out there and that no street light was going to go on. After many minutes of going back and forth, she at last allowed that maybe there was no street light.

The red room was a small room that could seat two people comfortably. If there was a third person, they would typically stand in the doorway leaning against the door frame. We called it the red room because it was painted a deep colonial red, my father's favorite color.

My father had used the room as a study until he died, and in the evening after dinner he could usually be found there. My mom had hung a collection of ink drawings and etchings in the room so that two of the walls were all but covered by them. The drawings and etchings portrayed street scenes, country scenes, an American Indian, and the profile of a woman from the nineteenth century, among many others. The black frames and black lines of the artwork created a striking contrast with the red walls. The incandescent table lamps in the room produced shadows that hovered over the walls and ceiling.

"I am glad we had this discussion," she said at the end of our conversation about the street light, closing it on an amicable note.

She seemed completely normal and I was relieved that she was not disturbed and had taken in the new information about the street light without serious complaint or confusion. I left to go to the kitchen to be with Heidi and when I returned in ten minutes, she was staring out the window again.

"What are you doing, mom?" I asked as I sat down.

"I'm waiting for the street light to go on," she answered as if we had never discussed the matter at all.

I reasoned with her again and she relented again, but it was clear that she had created an image in her mind—an "illusory thought"—that might never be dislodged.

The next day Heidi and I went into New York City to visit a friend of Heidi's. We walked around Central Park and came back to Scarsvale in late afternoon to make dinner for my mom—pasta shells with red sauce. While we were cooking, my mom, as was her habit when I was home, came into the kitchen and asked me to make her a drink. I poured her usual one ounce of Scotch over ice and gave it to her. She sat back and asked about our day and what we were going to do in Ukraine. She seemed relaxed and happy. During this visit, I could tell that her cognition was changing and I could see brief instances of the vacancy of dementia in her eyes, but she had no real trouble following a basic conversation or making appropriate rejoinders, provided we spoke loudly and not too fast.

I said we were going to Ukraine to visit a friend and explore the region for a few months, and maybe stay longer.

"Do, do, do," she said. "That's what I tell all my young family members. Do it now, while you still can."

"That's good advice, mom," I replied as Heidi worked a spoon through the marinara sauce.

"Good!" my mom said firmly, replying to my spirit more than my words. "I did as much as I could when I was younger and now I am content to stay right here at home. I don't want to go *anywhere!*"

When she was in her mid-sixties, starting a few years after my father died, my mom had gone on yearly tours to various parts of Europe, the Middle East, and South America. The tours were designed for an older crowd and they stayed in college dorms while taking a few classes about whatever region they were in. She had only stopped going a few years earlier, a year or two before she fell and broke her hip.

She finished her drink and asked for another, which I made for her.

"Are you ready to eat now?" I asked. The pasta had boiled long enough and Heidi and I were about to drain it in the sink.

"Yes, I am," she said. "I'm always hungry." After a pause she added, "And I don't fuss. I eat whatever is given me. Some women my age won't eat this, they won't eat that. I say, *phuu*, just be glad you have some food!"

We set her plate in front of her and all of us ate heartily. After dishes had been removed, we sat around the table and talked. I poured my mom a small glass of *Creme de Menthe*, her favorite after-dinner drink. Heidi pushed her chair back from the table and rubbed the heel of her foot, which had developed a small blister from walking around the city. My mom asked her what was the matter and Heidi said that she had a small blister on her foot.

"A blister?" my mom said, somewhat icily. "Is that all? When I was your age, I never complained about anything."

"I'm not complaining," Heidi said.

"If that is all you have to worry about, I think you are lucky!" My mom finished the first of her "anti-sympathy" comments, as Heidi came to call them, with an abruptness that recalled her stoical old self in some ways but that was too sharp and not characteristic of how she had actually been in the past. I could see that she was losing her sense of life's small dramas by magnifying a single aspect of Heidi's day above all else that had happened—the dinner, the friendly company, the good conversation we had shared until that point. My mom's face remained frozen in a harsh expression for a few moments before she turned her gaze away from Heidi's foot.

"That's not her," I said to Heidi later, "but it is a distorted aspect of how she could sometimes be. She is not one to sympathize with complaints or displays of weakness."

"But I wasn't complaining," Heidi said.

"I know. I'm sorry she said that, but you are new to her and maybe she doesn't know how to behave around you. At least she is thinking of you as a member of the family," I continued, "because she would never be that rude to a guest in her house."

Chapter Ten

Heidi and I went to Odessa, Ukraine and stayed for about three months. One evening we were at my friend Jonathan's place and he suggested we call my mom on Skype. We did and she answered the phone promptly. Since it was a Skype connection, we spoke on speaker-phone, so everyone could hear.

"Hello?"

"Hi mom. This is Tom."

"Oh, Tommy. How are you?"

"I'm fine, how are you?"

"Well, I am just sitting here doing nothing."

"Do you remember that I am in Ukraine?"

"Of course I do," she replied," But I can't believe you are in *that* country."

I wasn't sure why she emphasized "*that* country" but she sounded very upbeat and happy to hear from me.

"When are you coming home?" she asked.

"I am not sure. We plan to stay for at least a few months," I said.

"Well, good," she said. "Do it while you can!"

We talked a bit more about my brother and sisters. Heidi said hello, and then we hung up. After the call was over, Victoria, Jonathan's girlfriend and future wife asked, "How old is your mom?"

"Eighty-nine," I said though I think she was actually eighty-eight at the time.

"She sounds much younger," Victoria said, seeming genuinely surprised.

I was happy to hear Victoria say that about her and very glad that my mom had not once sounded senile or out of it at all. We had stuck to familiar subjects and she had handled herself well. I don't know why I cared—everyone would have understood—but it just felt really good that she had sounded so normal. My spirits rose as I further absorbed the relief of her not needing me and of her approving of my being in *that* country.

I looked at Heidi who sat with her back against a window frame on a wide window sill. Her knees were drawn toward her chest. Long ornate polyester curtains hung behind her, half-covering the soiled windows that looked out on the dark street below. As she smiled at me, I wondered if she were smiling because she was happy too or because she was amused at my elation from speaking with my mom.

Jonathan's apartment, which was in an old building on the second floor, was a recent upgrade of a set of rooms that had been constructed during the nineteenth century. It had huge windows, very high ceilings, a small kitchen and an even smaller bathroom with a tiny "modern" shower, which meant there was a wand and a Plexiglas door. The four of us talked for a few minutes and then decided to go outside to take a walk. As we climbed down the stairs our voices rang in the cold stone stairway.

Freed from worry about my mom, I became more present to my surroundings, to the mix of old Ukraine, Stalinism, and now the many upgrades one saw all over. Of the three, the upgrades seemed the most transient as most of them were cheap and had been added onto something that had been there a long time. Jonathan's gloomy building and a desolate section of stone-strewn dirt in front of it vividly recalled the past for me, the devastating mass murders of the Bolsheviks followed by the devastating mass murders of the Nazis.

Some bits of trash curled in the wind near a black pole at the edge of a bridge. We went away from the trash, up a small hill.

As we walked, I wondered how can a region—and I mean the whole region scourged by Nazis and Stalinists—ever recover? Life goes on, of course. But how can a region that has known so much destruction, both of people and cultures, ever get over it?

Doesn't the fear and death and sadness permeate the earth and air and remain like some sort of permanent stain? Surely it remains longer than the amount of time that has passed since then.

The night was cold with snow on the sidewalk. As we walked toward the center of town, we passed some rooms that Alexander Pushkin had occupied in 1823. I asked Victoria if she had ever been inside and she said she never had. I wondered how would Pushkin have responded to Ukraine one hundred years later in 1923 when the Bolshevik terrors were looming, or in 1933 when the Holodomor, or Great Famine, caused by deliberate human actions, took millions of lives?

Pushkin had died from wounds received in a duel to preserve his honor. How do you compare the honor of a single poet with the humiliation of millions of souls? And how would Pushkin look on us today as we sell baubles and lies and have no honor toward the past but treat it as yet another commodity to be marketed for ever changing political designs?

As we stayed longer in Ukraine, I came to feel a constant sense of fear and oppression as if the stain of death and terror on the earth and sky were real and not just my imagination.

Was that why my soon-to-be demented mother wondered out loud about *that* country? Did she sense something deep as the outer structures of her mind began to dissolve?

One of the reasons I went to Ukraine is my truck was stolen. Another reason is my friend was there. And another reason is my mom was of Lithuanian ethnicity. Lithuania is not Ukraine, but historically the two regions are connected by trade, by culture, by being part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and, sadly, by Nazism and Stalinism.

My mom's parents were from a part of Lithuania known as Žemaitija (Samogitia). Žemaitija, which is in northwestern Lithuania on the Baltic coast, is characterized today by being one of the most ethnically cohesive regions of Lithuania. Historically, Žemaitija was the last area of Europe to be Christianized and as such, it faced constant onslaughts by the Teutonic Knights (Knights of the Cross and Knights of the Sword) during their Northern Crusades.

There were many battles between 1229 and 1410, when the Teutonic order was at last defeated by combined Lithuanian and Polish forces in the Battle of Grunwald (Žalgiris), which ended the knights' Northern Crusades.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Žemaitija played a major role in the revival of Lithuanian culture.

My mom's parents left for the US in 1910 and from the stories I have been told, my mom's father reflected this period of that culture. He read widely, was a strong advocate of Lithuanian independence, and was not religious. He made my mom take classes in Lithuanian, so she grew up speaking the language fluently. This was not simply a matter of pride for my grandfather but also of survival, for Lithuanian literature and education in the Lithuanian language had been banned for many years by Russian authorities who had occupied the region since 1795. There had been a long fight to keep the culture and language—the oldest or least changed spoken Indo-European language in the world—alive and he was still riding that wave.

My mom grew up in Wosta, Massachusetts in a small Polish-Lithuanian community, became a lawyer, almost married a Jew, and eventually moved to New York with my father, who had come from the same Polish-Lithuanian community in Wosta. I am not sure if my mom "fell back" into the security of her community after having been jilted by her Jewish fiancé, but that would be a reasonable assumption. I doubt my dad ever knew about any of that. My mom's brother, who was in the same engineering class as my father at Wosta Polytechnic Institute, introduced my father to my mom.

My father was a very quiet man most of the time except when he was alone with my mom. Then he might be heard—always from another room—talking volubly and at great length with her. If I entered the room, he would usually fall silent as if the subject were not suitable for my young ears. I am completely certain that my father loved my mom deeply and respected her opinion in most matters. He ceded all control of the house, food, decorations, and to a large extent, how they lived and how their children were raised to her.

Neither my father nor my mother told me anything substantial about my ethnicity until I was a teenager, though there were comments or jokes made in passing before that time. Though my father felt real emotion for his old community and his ethnic roots, my mom did not.

To her, she was an American with an American name and she was willing and able to take American institutions at face value. And that meant that my mom subscribed to a thin, abstract level of culture that exists more in textbooks than in the real world. As she ignored her past and most of her old friends, and even distanced herself from her own brother, my mom substituted shallow forms and ideals for actual human relations.

I am not a big fan of personalized ethnic stories, so I will keep this side of my mom's life to a minimum. It suits me and it suits her.

One aspect of Lithuania that is interesting is it is so small. In this it stands as a warning against multiculturalism, post-nationalism, or internationalism. Though the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was multicultural, and is famous for having been so, there were not so many people in the world back then and the movement of peoples into the Commonwealth did not seriously threaten anyone. It is a past that is not a model for the present. In 1720, the population of the entire world was well under one billion people and you mostly had to walk if you wanted to go somewhere and were allowed to do it, which most people were not. If you internationalize and multiculturate Lithuania, you won't have Lithuania anymore. Preserving borders and nations preserves a multicultural world, a world of variety, while breaking them down destroys the smallest cultures as it mixes everyone into some vague and irresolute glomeration of transnational everyman.

In this, Lithuania and Ukraine are signs of what may come to the world. Lithuania will disappear, as will Europe and every other part of the world that is exposed to massive movements of people. The result may very well look like Ukraine today, a region of broken traditions and lost cultures and languages. Ruled by tendentious oligarchs and overwhelmed by external forces, Ukraine is a failed society as well as a failed state. To Ukrainians, who are powerless in their own lands, the lesson is painfully obvious.

You can only truly tolerate others if you have a place to stand yourself, a place where you can protect yourself. If you are open to everything, you will end up a victim of almost anything. This is as true for individuals as it is for societies. Lithuania and Ukraine both have been invaded many times. Before the Nazis and Bolsheviks, there were the Czars, and before them were the Latifundia and sociopathic Arenda system, the Teutonic knights, Ottomans, and before them were the Mongols, who killed or drove away nearly everyone in what is now Ukraine. And that is not the whole list.

Stalin's, Hitler's, and Genghis' internationalism meant invasion and death. In today's world, some invasions are physical, as Hitler's was, but many more are intellectual—cultures are invaded and annihilated by thoughts, media, ideas. Tibet has suffered an invasion first of thoughts and ideas and now of a massive influx of Chinese. Tibetan culture and people are all but doomed.

So, I am not a fan of ethnic identification *and also* I realize that without any of it, you will be subject to forces beyond your control and far more perverse than what people generally expect. Widespread self-immolation among Tibetans is a good indicator of what may come to all of us.

My own story is in many ways the story of someone with no identity, for though my parents had roots I have none.

One evening during the Vietnam War, while I was home from college for a visit, I was discussing the war with my parents at the kitchen table and said that I might go to Sweden or Canada if I were drafted. My mother said, "If you are drafted, you should go. That's what you are supposed to do as an American citizen. It's your duty."

I protested through my demeanor and looked to my father for his opinion. He said, while looking straight at me with a thoughtful, serious gaze, "I agree with you. It's a bad war and I see no reason why you should risk your life for something like that. If you want to go abroad, I will support you and help you."

"*Tom*," my mother gasped at my father in surprise.

"My father left his village because he didn't want to get killed in the Russian army and I don't see much difference."

Since I was majoring in Chinese, I was well-aware that the war had been a bad idea and that nothing good was going to come of it. I felt very sure of myself politically, and now with the support of my father, secure emotionally as well. My mom softened her tone a bit but did not change her mind.

"Well, I still think that we should all do what the government asks of us."

I lost a measure of respect for her at that point since it was my life she was offering up to her ideal of civic duty, but I also knew that her opinion was more of an idea to her than a heartfelt passion. I quoted some Henry David Thoreau and said that it was a citizen's duty to do what is right, not what the government says. "What if you were in Nazi Germany?" I asked, challenging her with that question which was so common back then. "Would you still do as you were told?"

My mom answered honestly, "I suppose I would have. I might have been killed if I disagreed and I don't think most people had any idea of what was really happening. Most people never do."

I was shocked by her answer as not cooperating with the Nazis had been a main feature of my education in Scarsvale. Still, I could tell that she was being truthful and that she had a valid point of view. After all, most Germans had cooperated or gone along with it and there still are questions to this day about what they could have or should have been able to understand.

At the time, of course, I did not realize how much my sense of culture and right and wrong was a product of my own education, my own American culture. I felt I had taken the moral high ground and there was not much my mom could do to defend herself. For her part, her civic imagination and moral sense had come from her education and her almost in-bred stoicism, which to her included realism and adaptability.

We all agreed to drop the subject and I cannot remember it ever coming up again. I was eligible for the draft for a short time in 1970, but drew a safe number in the lottery that determined who would be called and who not, so I never did have to decide what to do.

For what it's worth, my mom held a very mild anti-German prejudice, which was typical of her and her father's time. I want to emphasize that my mom's anti-German feelings were, indeed, very mild. Her best friend for many years in Scarsvale was of German extraction. I knew of her mild prejudice from a few statements she made during my youth. Once she said that "you can't trust Germans." Another time she said, "They smile at you and pretend to be friendly, but you can never be sure."

In the 1970s, my mom and dad established contact with my dad's relatives in Lithuania and even went to visit my dad's uncle and his family one summer. While my father treasured those relationships, my mom merely went along and after my father died severed all communication.

In her personal effects after my mom died, I found some letters addressed to her from my father's family and from one of their friends who lived in Kansas. I am sure my mom never answered any of them. For her, the illusion of sharing a culture with people she hardly knew was too tenuous to be taken seriously. She was a classic sort of American who had suppressed, even buried, the language and culture of her parents and forebears to replace it with the culture of a people she also hardly knew but that were nearby.

Heidi remembers me telling her that I thought that my mom was the sort of human who would adapt to wherever she was. "If you put her back in the fourteenth century, she would just adapt to how they were," I said.

At the time, Heidi was mildly shocked by what I said due to what she perceived as my mom's lack of principles. We have returned to this subject several times in the years since. By now, I think Heidi would agree that in a deep sense my mom's response to culture is quite profound—she sees that it is a kind of make-believe, an agreement among many people, and so she has no trouble adapting to whatever form it takes. And that's really all culture is.

One tranquil summer, when we were driving across country in the 1950s, my dad stopped the car at a beautiful mountain overlook drenched in sunshine. It was somewhere out West, but I have no memory of where.

As my father and sister walked in one direction, my brother and I went to feed some chipmunks who were scampering near an arrangement of rocks that formed a wall between the dirt parking area and the drop-off to the valley below.

The drop-off near the wall was not that steep though it looked like it was if you stood back where my mom was standing beside our car. She had her arms crossed, and her hair was tied in a kerchief due to a fairly strong wind.

"Hey, mom!" I called to her. "Watch me!"

Then I jumped over the rocks and crouched on the hillside, which made it look from her point of view that I had thrown myself off a cliff. I heard her yell in fright as she rushed toward the wall. I thought it was a wonderful joke as I am sure many eight year-olds have. My mom didn't laugh when she saw me pop my head up, but I was struck—even awed—by the very conspicuous look of raw relief I saw on her face. It's not that her expression proved she loved me, nothing that complex, but it did seal in me a bond with her that went beyond words or the conventional experiences available in Scarsvale.

Later, on that same trip, when we were visiting some friends of my parents in California, I lost control of myself in their swimming pool as the adults stood around a smoky barbecue at some distance from where I was. I was a very good swimmer and did not need supervision, but somehow I lost sense of

what I was doing and briefly panicked. As I flailed in the water and struggled for air before regaining control, which I did, I heard my father call my name and sprint toward the pool. He dove in and glided swiftly to where I was. I can still hear the sound of his voice calling "*Tommy!*" as he ran toward the pool. When he saw I was alright, he pulled me to the poolside and stayed with me for awhile. "The biggest danger in swimming," he said, "is panicking. You got control of yourself and that is good. Always remember that there is never any reason to panic. It will never help you in the water." Then he said, "You can keep swimming if you want, but sit on the side for a few minutes to let yourself calm down."

I did as he asked and then shortly returned to the pool. I told a friend this story years later and he said that I was probably testing my father, but I wasn't. I just panicked and he dove in. I wasn't testing my mom either when I jumped over the stones on the mountainside. I was just playing a pretty ordinary trick on her. Both incidents, though, did show me that I had a very deep bond with both of my parents and that if the chips were down, really down not just a little bit down, they would be there without hesitation. I also knew that if the chips were just a little bit down, that was my problem and I was on my own.

Chapter Eleven

Heidi and I left Ukraine in late February, traveling directly to New York. The flight was miserable with terrible air. On board, we watched in amazement as a large Orthodox Jewish man deliberately kicked a Ukrainian child's doll that had slipped into the aisle as he was approaching. The little girl cried, her mom looked shocked as she turned her head toward the man, and the man smiled with joyful menace. It was one of those moments that reminds you of how horrible this world can be.

A friend of Heidi's met us at the airport. Heidi went to her place in New Jersey for a few days while I went straight to my mom's by taxi. She was happy to see me and asked a few questions about where we had been and what we had done. I described Privos Market and general features of Odessa. She seemed to understand everything I was saying. I told her a story about when we were almost robbed in a park near the Potemkin Stairs that descend from the city to the Black Sea.

The park is to one side of the stairs and in winter it is usually deserted. There was some snow on the ground. Trees with no leaves lined the deserted walkways. Since the park was in full sight of a well-traveled pedestrian walkway above it and the Potemkin Stairs to the side, we felt completely safe wandering around within it. Eventually we wandered to the far edge of the grounds. The robbery—if that is what it was—came close to happening at this point as we climbed a flight of secondary stairs that led to the walkway above.

There was a stone wall around the stairs and unknown to us until it was too late, there was no view of where we were from the Potemkin Stairs or from the walkway above unless you leaned over the side of the wall. It was a perfect spot for an ambush.

As we surmounted the first flight, just before we turned toward the second, a really big Ukrainian guy bounded down the steps to pause and hover over us. I felt danger immediately and turned my head to look to the top of the stairs.

Sure enough, another guy was up there, appearing for all the world to be a lookout. I stared directly at him as did the big guy a couple steps above us on the landing. Something happened during that moment and the situation passed—either they hesitated because we might be cops or they had no bad intentions to begin with.

I am pretty sure they aborted a mugging, but cannot prove that. The event reminded me to be more careful and stay well away from any spot that could be used for an ambush.

My mom listened to the story and sighed with real discernment. "You have to be careful in those countries," she said. "The people are poor and don't know any better."

"Well, I am not completely sure what happened," I added.

"I know," she said, "but that sort of thing is pretty common. They carry knives…"

That was exactly what I had feared at the time and I said so. "But it worked out OK," I continued. "We weren't robbed."

"That's good," my mom said. Then she told me a story she had told me before about her getting robbed in Rome. Some guy on the back of a motorbike grabbed her purse and pulled. My mom pulled back. They struggled for a while, yanking back and forth, then she fell down on the sidewalk and lost her purse as the motorbike pulled away. She was seventy-eight at the time. She hurt her arm and hip, but not badly.

As she finished her story, I said as I had in the past that she had been crazy to fight with a young guy over something like that.

"I know," she said, "but I just didn't want to give it up. It was mine."

I was glad to see a flicker of pride and her amused awareness of it at that point. She had long cultivated a small reputation for being stubborn and maybe a little foolish about it. It was good to see deep self-awareness appear in her face and eyes as she finished her story.

At that point, I became aware that I had started monitoring her state of mind almost constantly when I was with her. I knew we had crossed a threshold some months before, but wondered at the rightness of my tendency to assess everything she did or said as being normal or not, like her old self or not, becoming senile or not. I vowed inwardly to judge her less and just be with her more. It did not seem fair for me to be constantly watching over her state of mind, deciding what was in character and what was not.

I was reminded of a time when I lived on the second floor of an old lady's house in Oregon. We became very good friends and I spent many hours talking with her. Her family and friends rarely visited and she never went out. Everything about her was normal, except she had no control over her gas. She farted frequently and always blushed in the most charming way afterward as she looked at me to see my reaction. I never flinched or paid any attention to the noise. After a really loud one one day, she looked at me and seeing no reaction but friendliness said, "You are a very kind young man."

We both knew I had heard. It was a small incident, but an example of how easy it can be to allow old folks, and others, to keep their dignity no matter the situation. In a few years, Heidi and I would be dealing with my mother's incontinence.

I bet a good many old people are admitted to nursing homes mainly because they can no longer get to the toilet in time or clean up properly after. My brother even said to me one day cringing with disgust, "I could never do that," meaning help my mom clean up. I don't blame him at all and am sure his was a common reaction. Still, that's a hell of a reason to be taken from your home and put away.

My sister Mira told me that her father-in-law, used to say that the only reason he was in a nursing home was he had gotten old.

"I didn't commit any crimes," he said with a shrug one day, my sister told me. "I just got old." The implied comparison with prison was obvious.

One thing I felt very strongly about my mom was that if we ever did put her into a nursing home someone would have to lie to her about where she was going.

Someone would have to tell her she was going on a short trip or that "we" were going to "try out" a new living arrangement "for her," something like that. Since I knew absolutely that I would never be able to lie like that myself, I also felt that I could not permit anyone else to do it either. There was just no way I would trick my mom or allow her to be tricked like that. And there was no way she would ever go willingly, with full knowledge of where she was going. At that moment, this was all just a vague feeling, but those feelings and conclusions would bear fruit fairly soon.

"What are your plans now?" my mom asked.

She was sitting in a room we called the sun porch, on her favorite wicker couch which she had painted white long ago. The paint was chipping and the seat of the couch had been mended many times. Years before, I had "permanently" fixed the sagging seat by laying a piece of plywood on it and covering that with cushions. A row of windows filled the wall behind her while a stack of magazines stood beside her on the couch. Her hand rested on top of the magazines as it often did when we talked in that room.

"We are going to take a road trip," I said. "We plan to drive out west very slowly to find a place to settle. We may end up in Oregon."

"Aren't you going back to California? I thought you liked it there."

"We do," I said, "but we both want to get away from the heat and see another part of the country. You remember that I lived in Eugene, Oregon once and liked it very much."

"Yes, I do," my mom said. "You're young, so do what you want. I say do it and have as much fun as you can."

"The older you get, the more I like your advice," I replied.

She laughed and went on, "Do it while you can. Then when you are my age, you can relax."

A big difference that showed in my mom during this period was her sense of what I should do had changed from what *she* would like to do to *whatever* I wanted to do. Though I was over fifty at the time, it still felt good to get this sort of approval from her. My feelings made me aware of how sensitive inter-personality can be. In some ways, my mom had never been deeply in tune with me and I had often ignored her advice, and yet just a few words of open-ended approval from her old face made me feel very good.

I just smiled and hung onto the moment, which she seemed to appreciate.

She asked me if I wanted to go out for dinner and I said I would rather stay home and offered to make something for us to eat. She said that would be "lovely."

Our old kitchen had hardly changed in forty years. It was still painted yellow and white and the old black Chambers stove was still there, its sleek polished handles that opened the flow of gas to the burners still hung like reverse tear drops beneath the metal protrusions you had to push with your thumb to make them turn. The handles were in a row at the front of the stove and if I had my glasses off and stood at a distance they blended into a streaked, silvery pattern that was delightfully confusing to me.

On the other side of the room was a counter with an inset sink. Above the sink were two windows that used pulleys and counter-weights like most of the windows in the house. Above the windows, my mom had strung some clear, tear-drop Christmas lights, which she plugged in every evening because she "loved the way they look."

A good many plants hung from various hooks around the windows or rested on the sills. One of my sister's orchids which she had put there over thirty years before sat on a wrought iron brace that had been screwed into a wall cabinet to the side of the sink. At night, the sink was lit by a small light with a turn-switch that worked but had been wobbly for longer than the orchid had been there. The small switch had black electricians tape around it and usually required several adjustments before the light stayed on.

The windows looked down on the back of the house and a detached garage below. Above the garage was an attic, bound on its two long sides by a low sloping roof.

When I was a boy, my friends and I had used that dusty attic, with its plain plank floor and low ceiling, as a fort or hideaway. It was hard to get up a small ladder and through a trap door that led to the attic if you were much over the age of ten or twelve, so it afforded us a good deal of privacy.

We read comics and sometimes smoked cigarettes up there. We had lain some old carpeting on part of the floor and sitting on it discussed over the years many points of boyhood philosophy. I can remember even then thinking that time was more important than money and that if there were any way I could remain free of the adult world, I would do it.

Sometimes when we were talking or smoking, we would hear my mom drive into the garage and call up to us—"Tommy, are you up there?"—as her car door closed behind her.

We usually stayed very still and let her believe we were not. Her call might have been due to curiosity or to get some help with groceries. We answered with silence not to avoid her or the work so much as to remain in our own world for a time longer.

She allowed me a lot of freedom when I was young. I had to be at home for dinner and lunch, but the rest of the day was more or less mine if there were no school. I guess that is how we ran into Citron and all that mess. But we also spent hours on our own at the Bronx River or in "the Village"—the old commercial part of Scarsvale—without supervision and free to do as we pleased. Given what happened with Citron, I can understand why mothers today are more careful, but I also feel sorry for all the fun kids are missing.

Chapter Twelve

After about a week, Heidi drove down from her mom's place upstate. She had retrieved her old car from her brother who was living in Washington, DC at the time. We had been separated for only a short time, but I had missed her very much. The contrast of her warm simple ways with the wealthy styles and

conspicuous pride that characterized so much of Scarsvale made me want to get out of town and on the road as soon as we could.

We spent a few days with my mom. Heidi scattered some wildflower seeds in the yard. We packed our little car, filling it with the few belongings we didn't want to leave behind, and drove south. We traveled extensively in Texas, Arizona, Utah, California, and then Oregon. We did a lot of hiking and camping. By the time we reached Eugene, we were both tired. Eugene had grown and was much busier than I remembered. We decided not to stay there but to drive some more. We ended up in Bend, on the east side of the Cascades in early May, rented a motel for a week and found a place to rent within a few days.

While we were in Bend, Heidi worked on an organic farm while I continued doing translation work online. Our lives were smooth and we had a good time. I continued talking frequently on the phone with my mom in what had become a normal pattern for us. We shared small bits of personal news, spoke about family members, and occasionally discussed national or world events. She rarely had much to say about politics, but I always liked hearing her opinion, which typically was very tolerant. Since we had traveled so much recently, I skipped going home for over a year.

There were no remarkable changes for most of that period until early summer 2007 when my mom started calling me even more often, as much as three times in a single morning. She also started mentioning the streetlight far more than she had before. The non-existent streetlight in front of her house went from being an innocent, easily dismissed image in an old lady's head to a sign that she was undergoing deep changes.

By August I knew that I had to go see her. I started making plans to go to New York when my sister Carol called and said that the Scarsvale police had called her about mom. Apparently she had been calling 911 several times per night to ask about the non-existent street light. The police told Carol that if we didn't get her to stop calling soon, they would have to start charging us for the calls and probably would have a social worker look in on her. The specter of the state taking over care of our mother frightened all of us. We all knew that she wanted to stay in her home and have little or no medical intervention, let alone intervention from the state.

I told Carol that I was making plans to visit and would be back soon. She said that Anne, my brother's wife, was going to stay with her for a while and that my sister Mira was going to move down to be with mom after Anne left.

"Is Mira going to move in?" I asked hopefully. If Mira were there, mom would be well-cared for.

"She has mentioned the possibility, but it's not a sure thing."

"Let's do what we can to help her stay. Mira would be perfect for mom. I can't bear the thought of sending her to a nursing home. Any chance you or Pep could have her move to a place near you?" I asked, thinking that we could buy or rent a house for my mom to live in.

"There's an elder care facility not far from me. I think I will look into that."

The last thing I wanted was to have my mom move into a nursing home, but I had to be careful not to say anything to upset Carol. She had a tendency to dislike long discussions or the consideration of several points of view. I had to have a clear plan clearly expressed to win her approval for anything.

"Well, let's see what Mira does. Maybe Pep can figure something out."

"I don't know, Tommy. Mom's getting very old and I don't think we have many options left. The care facility near me starts them out in something resembling an apartment and gradually moves them toward more nursing care as they need it."

"Mom would hate that."

"I know," Carol said, "but what else can we do?"

"Well, let's see how Mira works out. She might really enjoy being in Scarsvale."

I made plans to travel to New York in October. Heidi and I decided to rent a car and drive. During the next weeks I exchanged emails and phone calls with my siblings, hoping to find a good way to take care of my mom. My brother was willing to have her move near him, but Carol would not go along with the plan. I tried to have her move to Oregon, but no one was in favor of that. "Then we will never get to see her," they all said. "Now you know what a pain it is for me to travel back there all the time," I said, but that convinced no one of anything.

By today's standards four siblings constitutes a large family. To put it mildly, we don't always see eye to eye. Carol requires practicality and clarity with no ambiguity. Mira needs imaginative ideas that may or may not change. Pep will go along with anything while you are talking about it, but there's no guarantee he will do it when the time comes. I mainly wanted to keep my mom out of a nursing home and allow her the dignity and repose she deserved. For the record, I see nothing wrong with sending a parent to a nursing home and I think many people prefer the group setting to living alone. But not my mom. It just wasn't her thing.

Heidi and I drove from Oregon across the northern part of the country in early October. We visited with her mom and then I went to Scarsvale. By this time, Mira had accepted a job with the state of New Hampshire and said she would not be able to continue taking care of mom past Thanksgiving. I tried to get her to change her mind and then tried to get Carol to agree to move her near Pep, but neither plan was acceptable. As the nursing home rose in all of our minds as the most likely course of action, I said, "I can't allow it. One of us is going to have to lie to her to get her into the car and I just can't allow that."

"Then what do you propose?" Carol asked.

We were standing outside in the driveway near the back of the house. I said, "I am going to move back. Heidi and I will take care of her."

From the way this book has been written, it's probably fairly obvious that that is what was going to happen, but at the time I don't think anyone expected me to say that. No one had ever mentioned the possibility to me and I don't think any of them had ever seriously considered that I would move back to Scarsvale with Heidi. They all looked surprised, but accepted the idea readily as I must have appeared very determined. I was deeply opposed to the idea of forcing her to move or of lying to her, and my attitude must have shown. My nephew one day later suggested that I had volunteered because it was a Chinese thing to do. I am sure there is some truth in that, but it much more felt to me like something *I* had to do. During our trip across country, I had raised this possibility with Heidi. She had said that she would be willing to do it if that is what I wanted. My main fear was that my siblings would interfere in my life and cause problems between me and Heidi.

As we stood in the driveway, I said as much. "Look, you guys. I have a couple of non-negotiable demands before we go any further. First, don't bother Heidi in any way. And don't just come over whenever you want without calling. You can come anytime, that's OK, but call first."

"That's it?" Carol asked.

I said, "That's it. Just treat us—and especially Heidi—with respect. I don't want her to get stressed over any family stuff."

Everyone agreed and that was the end of the matter.

I called Heidi soon after that and told her what I had said. "If you don't want to do this," I added, "Just say so. We can *not* do this if you don't want to."

"No, I am OK with it," she said. "We can have fun and I can have a big garden."

"Another thing," I said, "any time you want to leave, we can. We can always change our minds."

"OK, so what do we do now?"

We decided to drive back to Oregon as originally planned, pack our stuff, and then turn around and drive back to Scarsvale. We both liked the basic idea. I told Mira that we would be in Scarsvale on or just after Thanksgiving, providing her with plenty of time to return to New Hampshire to get ready for her new job.

On our way to New York, we arrived in Pennsylvania on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. My whole family would be gathering at my mom's house for what might have been, for all I knew, our last Thanksgiving together. Yet, I didn't want to show up. We found a motel in Wilkes Barre and stayed there until Sunday when we planned to arrive only *after* Mira and Jacques and everyone else had left.

At the time I told myself that I simply did not want to expose Heidi—who is quite shy—to the entire brood at once, and there was a great deal of truth in this. She would have been overwhelmed by the sheer number of people in the house, most of whom she had never met. The other part of the truth, though, which I did not fully understand at the time, was more complex.

In the first place there was the dysfunctional pall of alcoholism that has spread over my family and many of the people closely associated with us. None of us are primary alcoholics, but some of us are "enablers" or "codependent" types to our spouses, or ex-spouses. Family gatherings for years had been characterized by the stewed thought processes and low-grade manipulations of alcoholics. I cringed at the thought of Heidi being pulled into any of those games.

In the second place, for years I had been hearing from time to time about some text or book my sister Mira was writing about me. A few people had mentioned it in passing, but no one told me anything specific. I couldn't tell if they were giving me a heads-up or just letting something slip. I had brought the subject up with Mira several times, but she always dodged my questions. It is a strange thing to ask of your sister and a difficult subject to press. For my part, I wondered why would Mira or anyone want to write anything about me. And I definitely did not want Heidi to be pulled into that vortex, if that was what it was.

In the third place, while Heidi and I were wandering from Scarsvale to Oregon after returning from Ukraine, we had spent two weeks in Big Bend National Park in Texas. On our first day there, we had gone to park headquarters and asked a ranger about where to camp. He told us the campsite was full but we could pitch a tent in many other areas.

"There won't be any facilities there is all," he said.

Heidi and I both immediately recognized his strong New Hampshire accent and asked him about it. He said that, yes, he had grown up in New Hampshire and had only been in Texas for a few months, his first post within the National Park system.

We talked some more about New Hampshire and I got around to telling him that I had spent a few years there in a cabin in the woods. What he said next surprised me.

"I think I heard of you," he said. He had dark hair and dark eyes. Like a tall thin bird, he looked both fragile and strong in his green uniform.

"What?" I replied. "How could you have heard about me? I was living in an isolated spot."

He then named the small town my cabin was in and said he had read about me. Then he looked sternly at me and continued. "It wasn't all good," he said importantly.

As I reeled under his response and the probability that he had really read something about me, I asked him what it was.

"Oh, it was just something someone had," he replied.

"It couldn't have been about me," I said.

"I think it was," he said, again looking sternly at me. "You were writing something yourself then, weren't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"It's you."

I was so stunned I dissociated from the scene and the park ranger. He gave us a map of places we could camp and we left.

At first, I didn't say anything to Heidi about my exchange with the ranger, but after we had driven a few miles, I brought it up with her.

She said that maybe I should be happy that someone in Texas had heard of me. I was not sure if she had seen the ranger's stern expression or if she had interpreted it differently than I had. Since she was complete with the incident and much more looking forward to finding a campsite than discussing a recent conversation, I let the matter drop.

As we drove along, though, I did feel profoundly bothered that my sister would have done something so extensive behind my back. And that it was something that made the ranger see me in a bad light, or so it seemed to me.

These were the thoughts and considerations that were in my mind when I decided to stay in Wilkes Barre and wait for my family to leave.

Chapter Thirteen

We arrived at my mom's around four on Sunday. We had arranged and double-checked with Mira that no one but my mom would be there. As I write this now, it seems cruel to me that I went to such lengths to avoid my family, but Mira seemed to understand, or at least cooperated, and I did have Heidi's

interests foremost in my mind. I really thought she might be overwhelmed by meeting my entire family first thing when we arrived.

My mom was sitting on the sun porch when we came in. I went to greet her and she responded effusively and with great pleasure at seeing me. We smiled and talked for a while.

Heidi and I had come in the back door and as I spoke with my mom, I could hear her going in and out of the house, bringing our things up the old wood stairs. I called to her and she came to the sun porch to say hello to my mom. My mother did not remember Heidi's name, but she seemed to recognize her and was gracious in greeting her.

From our conversation, I could tell that my mom had no memory that her house had been filled with people for five days or that Mira had left only an hour before. As ever, she took the moment as it came and focused on whatever was in front of her. For her, the recent past did not exist.

I told her that we would make dinner and call her for a drink at around five, which was her habit.

"That would be wonderful," she said, smiling broadly. Her normal social comportment included many broad smiles, an abundance of direct eye contact, and a sort of song-like speaking voice, accentuated occasionally with amiable laughter.

For most of her life she had been a capable conversationalist, mindful of social norms and able to keep within them. In her later years, however, as her faculties declined she took to complimenting people on their looks far more than she should have.

"You're so good looking," she said to Heidi, turning her shoulders and upper body smartly toward her and smiling. Her hands were clasped together in her lap. Late afternoon sun shone through the windows as my mom's now attentive face waited for Heidi's response.

The "ambush compliment," as I had come to think of it, had worked pretty well for my mother for years and I could see that it was having an effect on Heidi, though I was not sure what that was. As Heidi stood before her, she appeared uncomfortable and maybe a bit confused about how to respond. She looked toward me and then at my mom.

"Thank you," she said.

"You *need* a compliment once in a while," my mom said, stating what was obvious to her.

Though she wasn't fishing for a compliment for herself, I know she would have responded with enthusiasm had Heidi offered one.

Over the past decade, I had heard my mom compliment me and many others so many times, I saw it more as a trap than as social lubrication. My mom didn't mean her compliments to be a trap, but they functioned that way because an observer, such as myself, could watch people's reactions and be all but forced to judge them by a standard they knew nothing about, but which I knew.

The trap was especially bad for people who were either not used to being complimented on their looks or very used to it. If someone was not used to being complimented, they might beam with pleasure and draw closer to my mom in a very friendly fashion. If they were used to compliments, they might also beam but with the more reserved and practiced edge of someone experiencing the familiar.

The trap worked because the initial context of the compliment was my mom's senility while that of the unsuspecting victim was their life history. I honestly hated seeing it happen as almost everyone was caught somewhere in the mockery between theirs and my mom's and the moment's absurdity.

After Heidi and I left the porch to go to the kitchen, I warned her about my mom's compliments. I didn't want her to not know what I knew all too well.

"I know what you mean," Heidi said. "It feels a little embarrassing to hear her say that."

"She means no harm," I said. "She's just very old and working the few angles she has left."

I knew that it would take some practice for Heidi to receive a compliment from my mom graciously and without offending her, while also not taking it very seriously. Her compliments were little more than the gambits of a mildly anxious old lady trying to hold onto a social standard that was fast slipping away from her.

I warned a few other people about the ambush compliments, but not everyone as I did not want to undermine my mom's ability to socialize and enjoy whatever company was present. In this, Heidi and I as primary care-givers had the inside story—the *honne* as they say in Japan—as opposed to visitors who we allowed to act on the *tattemai*, the external "social truth" of the situation. My general rule was to tell close friends of ours or family members how we understood the matter, but not anyone else. Thus, Heidi's uncle and aunt were thoroughly charmed by my mom when they visited and were truly surprised to learn that she remembered nothing about them or their visit as soon as they walked out the door.

"But she seemed so with it, to understand so much," Heidi's aunt said on the phone when they called a few hours later.

"I know," Heidi explained. "She *is* with it to some degree. She is very much aware of what is happening in the moment, but forgets everything about thirty seconds later."

I was glad my mom had had that degree of success with Heidi's relatives. On another occasion some years later, a nurse and a young doctor-in-residence did a house call to check on my mom's feet, which were swollen. Lying in her bed and beaming the whole time, she complimented the young doctor many times.

"You are so good-looking," she said as he blushed and bowed his head smiling.

In this case, my mom's good spirits put everyone in a good mood. The young doctor clearly enjoyed the attention while I was very happy to learn that her feet were fine and to be expected at her age and in her condition. I felt grateful to the nurse and doctor for coming to see my mom as house-calls were becoming a rarity in that area.

As they looked around the house on their way out, I said, "You are looking at an antique home filled with antique furniture… and an antique woman. Little or nothing in this house has changed in fifty years."

I don't know what they thought, but imagine they had enjoyed seeing a small piece of the past preserved in authentic desuetude.

The nurse gave me her card and said I could call her any time if the need arose. When the time came and we did need her services again, she had stopped making house calls. No one at the Scarsvale Medical Center, where she worked, made house calls anymore, we were told.

As for my mom's compliments, after a few weeks at home I decided to try to get her to stop making them toward me. They interfered again and again with how I felt about her and how we interacted. Heidi and I had already decided that we were going to treat my mom with respect and "proper" deference, whatever that means, but we were not going to treat her like a baby or not react to her as a full-fledged human being if she went too far. We decided that if she was being really bitchy or insulting, for example, we would respond as we would to any other adult. My mom almost never acted that way, but during our first few months with her, she did slip into some nasty states of mind a few times, particularly in the way she treated Heidi who was a perennial a stranger to her for a long time.

Heidi and I also decided early on that we would always be honest with my mom, that we would not lie to her in any way. If we said we were going for a walk and would be back in an hour, that is what we did. If we said we were going into the kitchen and would bring her a snack in thirty minutes, we did that, too. We really worked at not uttering any falsehoods, however minor, to her. I think this was one of the best things we did for my mom and it made our presence much more satisfying to her. As the years went by, I could see that she implicitly, explicitly, and completely believed every word either one of us said to her. It gave her a lightness of mind and an easiness when around us that was gratifying to all of us. My mom had lived her whole life plying the waters of social routine, with its mixture of vagueness and strictness, ambiguity and false certainty. I imagine it was a great relief to be able to put all of that down with us and never have to think that we might mean something other than what we had said.

In this vein, I sought to get her to stop complimenting me all the time. My main method was to tell her that though I knew she was being kind, I did not value her compliments. "Tell that to your daughters," I said. "I don't want to be complimented on my looks. I am sorry."

"You don't?" she replied at first, "but you *are* so good-looking."

"Mom, please…"

Within a month or so, she spoke to me in that way much less and within a few more months had stopped completely. The only time she did it again after that was when someone else other than Heidi was in the room. Then she might, in her mild nervousness and confusion, fall back on that familiar routine and single me out for one more of her compliments.

My mom was a great help to Heidi and me because by our being honest with her, she taught us how to better be honest with each other. Ever since we made that decision, we have both watched what we say —to anyone—with great care. We avoid the little social lies or even saying conventional things like "I'll be back soon" when we know we won't be. It took us some time to clean up our speech in this way, but it has been a major benefit to both of us. Due to this and to other things, by our first spring at 15 Circle Road, we had already started referring to my mom as "our Zen master" and meaning it. Raising her to this level also helped us listen to her more carefully and learn more from her. It helped us pay better attention to each moment we were with her—and those moments were the only thing my mom really knew.

During our first winter, we all adjusted to each other slowly at first and then rapidly after my mom came to realize that, as she put it, she no longer was "in control."

The transition point came one evening at about nine o'clock in February. Heidi and I were in the dining room working on our computers when my mom came in the room, cane in hand. Standing just inside the door, ramrod straight and with as stern an expression as she could muster, she said in a loud clear voice, filled with conviction, "When I go to bed, I expect my guests to go to bed, too." She slammed the point of her cane on the hardwood floor and drew her shoulders back for emphasis as she waited for our response.

I had been using a standing desk for years, so my height may have added to my confidence in her eyes. I said, "Mom, there is no way we are going to go to bed when you do. No way." I looked back down at my computer.

She said, "Tommy!" and slammed her cane on the floor again.

I said, "Sorry, mom, it's not going to happen. You can stand there all night if you want. We are not going to bed when you tell us."

She stood and peered toward me with a level gaze and a slight hunch in her shoulders as she leaned forward to see me better. She did not appear angry or defeated or upset in any way. After a long moment, she said, even with some relief, "Well, I guess I am no longer in control around here."

I looked at her as she looked intently at me. The room was shadowy around two of its walls and across most of the ceiling as Heidi and I were using only small desk lamps to see our computer screens.

The dark oak floor, stained mahogany, held my mom as she pondered her next move.

"Well, please turn off the lights when you go to bed," she said in an even voice.

"I will, mom," I said.

"All right. Good night then. I'm going to bed now."

"Good night," Heidi and I both said.

I watched her move slowly out of the room to make her way to the stairs and then up to the second floor where she slept.

That moment shows so much about my mom. Her view of the world was fundamentally role-based. For all of my life, she was the one who had to be "in control" around me. And for almost sixty years, she had seen herself as "in control" of whatever happened at 15 Circle Road. Some sixty years of ingrained habit changed in such a short time. After that night, she never again tried to boss either of us around or insist on anything. In the months and years that followed, I was to hear her say many times, "Tommy, I am so glad that *you* are the one who is in control. You know what you are doing. You know how to do it. I think it's wonderful!"

And she meant it. Her role had changed and she accepted it completely. From that night on, she was always grateful, always cooperative, and always appreciative of everything. At last I saw the model she had wanted *me* to follow when I was young. I believe that she had always thought that that model—one is in control and the other is grateful for that—was inherent in all human life, that there was and could be no other model. For this reason, she was never able to instill the model in me. In her, it came with no instruction manual. And I just was not born with it. I would have needed an extensive instruction

manual and well-paced training to get it at all. I have been told that some people think I am a little wild and that I am that way due to my genetic make-up. I don't know what to say to that, but there was my mom, not wild at all, and with a genetic make-up very similar to my own.

Some examples of the nasty behaviors she did before that crucial night in the dining room are as follows.

Her main target was Heidi, who hour-by-hour, appeared as a stranger to her. Sometimes she asked me in a whisper where Heidi was. I knew that when she asked in that tone, no matter what I said, she would start to wonder if she was upstairs going through her things. "I have some valuable items up there, Tommy, and I don't want anyone going through them."

"Mom, Heidi is not going to go through your things. Please don't talk like that."

She might stop at that point, but look severe and shake her head with a world-weary understanding that that's what people do when you are not watching them. I recalled that she had fired Maria several times over suspicions like that.

Another thing she did quite often was to glare at Heidi's plate at dinner. With her old eyes and waning manners, she would lean one way and then the other to get a good look at Heidi's plate. Then she would look at her own plate, then at mine. In a truly nasty tone, she might say, "I hope you gave Tommy as much as yourself. Some women take all the food for themselves and leave their husbands to starve. They get fat while their husbands are very thin."

"Mom, please don't talk like that," I would say.

Heidi, justifiably would fume and glare back at her. Holding her plate up and tipping it toward my mom, she would say, "There, see! My plate has *less* food on it that Tommy's!"

This sort of incident happened many times and even continued after the night in the dining room, though it did improve after that night and it did eventually stop.

It's a reminder that people can become small parodies of themselves when they get old. My mom had a natural wariness about human beings, something she had learned in Wosta, which can be a rough city. But in her whole life, I doubt she had ever seriously believed that any woman she knew wanted her husband to starve. At most, it may have been a dream-like thought in her younger years that had knocked around in her head, and she may have briefly entertained it, but I seriously doubt she had ever actually believed anything like that about anyone. That said, her best friend in Scarsvale had been very heavy and her husband, who had been the music teacher at Scarsvale High, had been very thin and he had died at a young age, though not of starvation.

I remember once watching a friend's grandfather leer at a gorgeous woman as she left and we entered a bakery in California. The old man was doing nothing unusual. But he was old, so his unguarded expression and slow movements made him look lecherous when a younger man doing the same thing would have appeared to be only glancing appreciatively.

When my sister Mira came for a week to fill in for us, my mom even suspected *her* of going through her things. Mira, to her credit, told me this when we got back.

"I was furious with her," Mira said, still mustering a good portion of feeling. "How could she accuse *me* of stealing or of 'going through her things' like that?"

I laughed because it was funny to see Mira so upset over the dreams of an old lady and it was also a relief to know that Heidi was not the only person she suspected. I felt bad for Heidi because my mom never accused me of anything. Now that Mira had gotten the same treatment, I felt that Heidi would be able to see even more clearly that my mom's nastiness had nothing to do with her personally. It was just an old lady's simmering brain.

Another thing my mom did before that night in the dining room was she would stand at the top of the stairs on the second floor after she had gone up to bed and bang her cane on the floor repeatedly, and as loudly as she could.

"Tommy, when *I* go to bed I expect *you* to go to bed, too!"

If I ever answered her, I don't remember. We simply ignored her until she stopped and went to her bedroom. One thing about someone as old as she had become is they don't have the stamina anymore. My mom had the idea and she was able to act on it, but she couldn't keep up the fight. She would get tired and give up. This aspect of her senescence was really a very good thing because it allowed her stop doing unnecessary behaviors, to stop being a parody of herself. Within about nine months of our arriving, she had stopped needing to be in control, stopped accusing Heidi of stealing or of taking more food than me, and she had long stopped demanding we go to bed at the same time she did. If you are ever in the position of being a care-giver to an old person, it's good to remember that they don't have much fight left in them and will figure that out for themselves. There is no need to argue much or humiliate them, as reason has a good chance of prevailing. My mom's making the transition out of the parody stage, I believe, was helped by our always being truthful with her. It was as if our truthfulness gave her untruthful fantasies no place to be. I know that within a year, she felt much more relaxed about our being there and so did we.

Chapter Fourteen

One aspect of my mom's character that stands out for me to this day is she tended to see virtually all situations as conforming or not to rules held in her own mind, while imaging other people to be the same and to subscribe to largely the same rules.

"You know what you are doing. How to do it and when to do it. I think that's wonderful!"

We heard her praise us in this way many times. Her old face would beam with pleasure as she bestowed this all important meta-compliment on us.

In one sense, she was aware that she was dependent on us and probably felt a need to show her gratitude. In another sense—a more important one—that is how she saw the world and it genuinely delighted her to watch us conform to her expectations. As we cooked in the kitchen or straightened up a room she was in, her cheeks would redden with pleasure as her being appeared to rise above the fray to repose in a higher realm of observation and approval.

"That's what I like to see! You know *exactly* what you are doing!"

My mom was not an alcoholic, but I think she was what might be called a proto-alcoholic or a potential one. Like many alcoholics, her belief in rules was so fundamental to her I hardly think she understood anything else. Whether alcoholics start out that way, like my mom who never went the full course, or become that way to control the chaos of diminishing cognition, I don't know. Whatever the etiology, it does seem that both alcoholics and rule-based people like my mom need rules or standards or simple

heuristics to guide them through life. These *kata*, or forms, as they are called in Japan can be a great help in many situations, but they also just as often stifle spontaneity and genuine communication because *other people*, not just the self, are subsumed beneath them.

To her great credit, when my mom started doing the sessions with her friends in her late seventies, she learned new rules, rules that allowed her to converse with me in ways that were much more fulfilling for both of us.

My mom never became an alcoholic, but she almost did and here's why I think so.

When I was twelve and starting to really get into reading adult books, I went down to the kitchen every afternoon around five o'clock to talk to my mom about whatever book I was reading. She would be fixing dinner, and in the winter it would be dark outside. If the weather were cold, I would sit on an exposed radiator at one end of the room and rattle on about whatever book I was reading—*The Agony and the Ecstasy* or *Catcher in the Rye*, for example—but rarely, if ever, did my mom respond in a way that showed she had even heard what I had said.

She almost never had anything to say in return, except perfunctory statements like "that's interesting" giving way immediately to other perfunctory statements like "now what am I doing next," referring to the meal she was preparing. I suppose this sounds strange, but we went on like this for many months. I know that I was trying to establish a deeper relationship with my mother, but she either didn't understand that or didn't know how to react or, as Heidi once said, didn't even care though I do not actually think that was the case. At the time, I did not realize that my mom never read books, but only newspapers and magazines. I thought that all adults read lots of books—that that was almost what it was to be an adult. Obviously, if your main information in life is coming from books, as mine was, a mistake like that is going to be hard to see, and I did not see it for years.

In retrospect, I understand my mom's behavior much better now. Many people were like her back then. Children were made to be seen not heard. And my interests were very different from hers.

More importantly, though, that's when she had started drinking heavily.

To this day, I do not believe my mom had any idea what she was doing. In her mind, I think, she was just having a few drinks before dinner like everyone else. Drinking was something many people did a lot of in those days. The early sixties were marked by post-war consumerism and good times.

As I sat in the kitchen with her on those late afternoons in early winter, I began to notice that my mom poured herself many glasses of sherry. She had her cutting board, mixing bowls, and food prep supplies on a counter on one side of the room, while the stove was on the other. All you had to do was turn around and take a step to get from the counter to the stove or back. The stove was an old, black Chambers gas stove while the counter top was a yellow Formica. She kept her glass in one corner of the counter and the bottle—a half-gallon of Almaden cocktail sherry—on the wooden hutch beside the counter. Almost unconsciously, she would finish one glass and pour another. And another, and another.

From my reading, at the age of twelve, I knew the tiniest bit about alcoholism. I knew the word and that it meant drinking too much and that it was becoming a recognized social problem. I had no idea—not the vaguest idea—though how serious the condition is. I just knew of it as an idea, something I had read about.

Anyway, as the weeks and months passed, I continued trying to talk to my mom as I continued to watch her drink. My usual habit was to talk with her for thirty to forty-five minutes and then go back upstairs to my room at around quarter to six to read some more. My father usually came in the door at 6:10. The timing was precise because he almost always came home on the same train that left Grand Central Station around 5:30.

Once he got home, I would go back downstairs and lurk in the kitchen until dinner was ready. We weren't allowed to watch TV during the week or during most of the weekend, so there was nothing much else to do but hang around and watch my parents and siblings as we slowly gathered together in the warm room filled with the wonderful odors of food. My mother was a very good cook as was my father, which was unusual for men in those days. They never forced us to eat but never allowed us to be fussy either, and they prepared very good meals that were much healthier than what most people eat even today.

I can remember my mom on some days sitting at the kitchen table before dinner, getting fairly drunk and very happy, sprawling back a bit in her chair and exclaiming, "How lucky I am! To be sitting here luxuriating while my husband cooks dinner! How many women can say that? How many men are willing to cook like this? Tom, you are *wonderful!*" My father usually cooked the meat dishes to go with whatever else my mom had prepared, often something like salad, mashed potatoes and a vegetable. My father would typically react to my mom's words with a mixture of masculine feigned bashfulness and matter-of-factness. "I find it relaxing to do this," he might say. "And it's interesting to know how to cook a good steak." My father had been trained as a chemist, though he ended up practicing law, so he well-appreciated the chemical reactions that took place with the application of heat to food.

As this sort of scene unfolded many times, I continued to observe my mom's drinking habits, both before my father came home and afterward. Before long, I became convinced that she was becoming an alcoholic as I understood the concept. Knowing what I know now, I think she was starting down that path, but at the time I was just combining an observation of her behavior with a definition I had read.

Rather than say something as my suspicions took concrete form, I decided to bide my time and observe her more closely. I observed what she drank, how often she poured her drinks, and how much she consumed per day. After a month or more of careful observation I was ready to say something. One day when she had just poured her last drink before dinner, when she always stopped, I spoke. "Mom, do you realize that you have just drunk a quart of sherry?" I spoke loudly to the room so my father would be sure to hear me. Only the three of us were there.

"I did not!" she replied forcefully.

"Yes, you did," I said. "And you drink the same amount every night—one quart of sherry."

"Tommy, stop it. I don't drink that much," she protested again.

"Yes, you do," I said. "I have been watching you."

My father was standing near the stove but paying rapt attention at this point. I got up from my chair and walked to the hutch where she kept her sherry. I picked up the bottle and pointed out that it was half-finished. "You just opened this bottle today. I saw you do it earlier," I said.

Both of my parents looked at me, waiting for more. "It says here," I said, reading the label, "that this sherry contains twenty percent alcohol."

"So?" My mom said. "It's just sherry."

I was a little unsure of myself at this point, but pressed ahead based on the math I had done.

"Well, that's true," I said, "but scotch whiskey is only forty percent alcohol, so you are drinking the equivalent of a half-quart of scotch every night."

"That's not true," my mom said, her voice rising. "Scotch is eighty percent alcohol."

"No," I said. "Scotch is eighty *proof*. That means forty percent. Proof is double the percent. If sherry is twenty percent alcohol that means it is half as strong as scotch."

I looked to my father hoping for confirmation.

"He's right," my dad said.

"He is?" my mom replied dumbfounded.

"Yes," my father said. "It doesn't matter what the drink is, only the alcohol content."

From his reaction, I gathered that my father had noticed my mom's drinking but never said anything about it. That was typical of them and their generation. Topics like that were hard for them to bring up.

I said no more, as my mom reddened with genuine surprise and shame. To her great credit, she stopped drinking heavily that day and rarely bought sherry for her own consumption again. From that day forward, she confined herself to no more than two ounces of scotch over ice per day.

Years later, she told me that the most important thing to remember about drinking is always measure how much you are consuming. "It's too easy to drink more than you need if you don't measure it," she said, though her comment did not directly refer to the scene described above, which we never mentioned again.

I hope I am not painting my mom in a bad light. I went to the kitchen so many times because I really liked her. Most of the time, she was kind and very tolerant. She was an excellent cook and always made good lunches for me when I walked home at noon every day from elementary school. Even when I was in junior high school, she was always at home when I came back from school. When I got to high school, she rarely interfered in my private life. Still, communication with her, and with my father, was oddly limited, especially as I got older. It is in that sense that I say my mom was a sort of dry drunk, someone with a rule-based mind that has trouble getting too far from the stable ideas—the static semiotics—that bring order to their world.

When I discussed this period of time with Heidi one day, she asked me, simply, "Why *should* your mom have talked to you?" Why indeed? *I* am the one who talks a lot, not my mom, not my father, and not my siblings. Why should they want to talk more than they are "geared for," as my mom might have put it? In retrospect, I think it's just as well—better—that she didn't talk deeply to me during that time because the subculture within which she existed, as I understand it now, had little to recommend it. Yes, it was wealthy, or at least "doing all right," but it was filled with alcohol and the loud, nervous, almost cartoonish, red-faced people and opinions that run on alcohol.

I saw these people at parties at our house, at the Scarsvale Congregational Church, as coaches on sports teams, as Boy Scout leaders, and a few years later I saw them as a lowly caddy at the Scarsvale Golf Club where I worked for two summers. I don't want to offend anyone and I am not going to name names, but—how to put it—I can well understand why Jews, especially in those days, despised the culture to which those people belonged. It was loud, selfish, full of ignorance and ignorant assumptions, boozy, intolerant, and just not very nice, at least not to me or to Jews. Unfortunately for me, Jewish adults, with a few wonderful exceptions, weren't very nice either. In fact, many of the adults in Scarsvale in those days—no matter what the persuasion—were shitty people, I am sorry to say.

I suppose the Jews were still fighting WW II, and who can blame them? They saw Christian culture as a nightmare filled with psychopathic maniacs who had killed millions. That those American psychopaths had fought on the side against the other psychopaths in Europe did not matter. That was a fine distinction because the root problem was the entire Christian world—based on a fantasy in their eyes about a Jew who was a nobody if he ever existed at all—was idiotic, insane, maniacally stupid.

As a sweaty, underpaid caddy or humiliated Boy Scout or dispirited member of one of Edgemere's "B" sports teams, which I was always put on by those adults—even though my gym teacher said I was the best athlete in the school—I came, independently, to see those people in much the same way. No one conversed. Instead, they talked smugly and often only when drunk. None of them was fair. Instead, they viewed the world, and me, through the shellac of group opinions. I know that a big part of this truth is my parents did not fit well into that world and I did not fit well into my parents' word and, thus, I was doomed—or blessed—not to fit well into anyone's world.

Years later, one of those people, who was of my generation, said to me that I had "just gotten on their bad side," as he explained it. So, not much had changed. That world was so shallow and boozy that even those institutions that had been established for the good of children—Sunday schools, Boy Scouts, sports teams, schools—had no means to train the adults who ran them. For proof, look at the number of sex-abuse cases that have come to light in all of those areas. I was never sexually abused by any of those people, but the shallowness of those institutions can be seen by how rife sex abuse was. If one or two do that, ten look the other way, and scores more are laboring under other twisted pathologies—narcissism, sadism, authoritarianism, quackery, pride, alcoholism.

I am glad it was that way, though, because it could not have been otherwise as the whole world is like that, all of history is. Someone had to show me the way and if negative examples were all I could get, then that is what I got. I honestly do not regret it or blame anyone. The entire USA in those days, and still today but in different ways, was a mess and I might as well learn about it early on, which I did.

In some important ways, my belonging to a very small ethnic group—which I barely knew about until I was a teen and which was denied, even concealed, by my mother and father—made me uniquely able to see the culture of Scarsvale, with its many ethnic and religious subdivisions, from a passably objective, outsider's point of view.

The groups that treated me the best were the Irish and the Jews, though Jews were also some of the meanest and most destructive. Mountebank and Rathbone have been discussed, as has Citron, but there were many more who were only slightly less bad.

One day when I was in high school, after I had started at Wosta Academy, my mom took me aside on a beautiful spring day while we were standing on the front walk of 15 Circle Road.

She said, "Tommy, I hear that you have a Jewish girlfriend."

I said, "Yes, I do," surprised that my mom would say something like that to me. Sex, and thus girlfriends, were topics she never mentioned.

"Well," she said. "I am not going to say you shouldn't do that. It's your life and you can do what you like… but… I will be interested to see how it turns out."

Her tone was distant, philosophical, stiff. I recall the sun shining on us and the rhododendron bushes beside us as she spoke those words, which came before she told me the story about Fishburn jilting her after his mom told him she did not want him marrying a non-Jew.

I remember protesting ineffectually, flustered that she had even raised the topic. To me, at that time, Judaism was just another religion like Catholicism or Congregationalism.

My girlfriend even joked with me about Hanukkah bushes, which were the Jewish version of Christmas trees. I remember her asking me about Christianity in much the same way that I had asked Kelly about Catholicism, and I took it as being the same way. At sixteen, I didn't know much and surely did not understand the wide gulf between our worlds, one my mom knew existed even if she did not understand many of the details.

My girlfriend, Marcy, told me that she did not believe in Judaism or even like it very much. Like me, she was a marginal person in her culture, though neither of us understood anything about marginality at the time. Marcy had spent some years growing up in White Plains, on the border of Scarsvale, before her family—she had one sister—moved into a home on Brite Ave.

"Actually, I hate Jews," she said to me on many occasions. "They are mean."

When I protested, thinking of the many Jewish students at school who I admired deeply, she would always reply, "You just don't understand. It's a very closed world. They may seem nice to you, but they are not."

I doubt she was referring to any of our friends, but rather to the adults that ran her world, whom, like me, she did not have much reason to like or respect.

"You probably think that I am going to marry a nice Jewish doctor like my mom always says, but I am not!"

One night around nine o'clock, when we were in eleventh grade, Marcy took me to a house in the *Berkley* section of Scarsvale. I didn't know why she was taking me there or what she expected to happen, but I went along with her. As we strode up the front walk, I could tell that she was energized, forthright if not angry. She tried the door handle and walked right in when it turned without a key. She had not told me who the people we were going to see were, but I surmised that they were relatives—an uncle or aunt—or some friend of her parents whose opinion was important to her.

The front hall of the house was dimly lit. There was a closed door leading to another section of the house and a hallway running along one wall, going off toward the kitchen, I think. Marcy asked me to wait in the hall while she went through the door, to prepare the people inside to meet me.

I stood in the hall for about ten minutes, if not more. During that time I heard muffled voices arguing back and forth. At the end, I heard Marcy shouting something in disgust. Then she came out the door, slammed it, and said to me, "Come on. We're going."

She practically ran out of the house with me following behind. I had trouble keeping up with her because I could not understand why she was so upset. I had been slightly bored but was not bothered at all for having to wait in the hall and was actually glad I had been spared meeting the people in the other room. I was very shy in those days and always happy to avoid groups of strangers if I could.

"Oh, God, I hate them all!" Marcy said as we climbed into her car. There was a wide expanse of grass down a small hill leading to Berkley Pond. I liked that part of Scarsvale very much and actually felt quite good as we got in the car. I did not understand her anger in the least.

"You don't understand who they are. How could they treat me like that? Jews are the worst people in the world!"

We drove around for a while, but the evening was irretrievable—Marcy was beside herself with anger and I had no idea why and she was unable or unwilling to explain.

My understanding now is that I had run into much the same situation my mom had with Fishburn—someone adamantly did not want Marcy dating a goy. It's unlikely her parents had nothing to do with it, though I am not sure if they both were involved.

Her mom was always dry but nice enough with me that I quite liked her. She complained to Marcy once because I had failed to stand up when she came into the den where we were watching TV, but otherwise, she did not seem all that displeased with me or, for that matter, all that different from other mothers I knew. Her style was more urban New York, with sleek jewelry, extra make-up and colorful tops, but she offered me food and would stay to speak with me in her kitchen, where I usually entered the house through a door leading to the driveway. Marcy's father, on the other hand, was an invisible presence. I only saw him once or twice in almost two years, slinking past the TV den through their darkened living room with a drink in hand. He never spoke to me and I never saw his face. It turns out, he was already an alcoholic and years later died of the disease, but I knew nothing about that then and doubt his not speaking with me had anything to do with booze.

I was profoundly cut off—marginalized—from almost everything in those days. I had been so weakened by Mountebank's ministrations that I had lost all of my boyhood friends, and since I had been sent to Wosta Academy, I had lost most of the new friends, many of them Jewish, that I had gained since in Scarsvale. Rathbone had openly mocked me in gym classes and then on the lacrosse team where I stupidly persisted in trying to gain his good graces for another year. My grades went up one year and down the next. My parents, to me, seemed to understand nothing at all of what was happening to me, though maybe they had understood more than I thought and that was why my mom had spoken to me about Marcy.

At Wosta, I spent many days suffering intense headaches but was so simple-minded, I told few people about them and never sought medical attention. For obvious reasons, I had become extremely wary of doctors and, by that time, had no abstract sense that anyone could or would actually do anything to help me. I knew I was on my own and felt a lot like a half-dead blob floating in a dilapidated boat on a dark river at night. I had no concept of hope, no sense of a future, let alone dreams for it, and not even any particular will or desire to survive. I just was. I read Jean-Paul Sartre at Wosta, and I think it helped me, though I am sure I did not understand it as he had intended, though who knows maybe I did.

I listened to Bob Dylan every night and when I was in a better mood, Simon and Garfunkle, the Four Tops, Jimi Hendrix, Cream, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and lots of blues and other stuff.

My roommate at Wosta, Joe, was a half-Jewish guy—his father was not—which to me seemed completely normal as I knew several people like that in Scarsvale. We got along very well and just as I was starting to feel that I had at last made a really good friend I could trust and care about, he was kicked out of school for doing something to one of the teacher's cars and smoking pot. I was utterly heart-broken, and left to exist in a room with no roommate, making me the only student who had a room to himself in the whole school. This furthered my isolation from other students and intensified my headaches, as well as my depressed enjoyment of Dylan and morbid solitude.

Joe had introduced me to marijuana, which I liked very much. It cured my headaches and made the world seem rich and alive again as it had always seemed before I ran into Mountebank. Joe lived in New Rochelle, which borders Scarsvale, so we were able to see each other when I visited New York on vacations from school after he got kicked out. Still, it was hard for me to keep up with him, or anyone else, since I had become even more isolated at Wosta after he left.

Eventually, Joe became friends with some of my old friends in Scarsvale, who I slowly lost touch with. This was one of my first experiences with how broad the Jewish network is. Before long, Joe and my old friends were better friends with each other than they were with me. As they drifted more closely together within their tight-knit community, I drifter further and further from any community at all.

As with the Boy Scouts and other people at Wosta or Scarsvale, I truly do not blame anyone for treating me in any way after Mountebank because almost no one had any way of knowing what I was dealing with. For those few that had some idea or even did know and worked that angle, like Rathbone, I salute you now with a very hearty and deeply felt fuck you. My problem was I was much less of a person than I had been before Mountebank and I simply could not hold my own with other people. I could still think and talk but had none of the vitality that is normal for most teenagers.

I know now that my experiences with social isolation and profound physical malaise did eventually bear good fruit. Within a year of moving to Scarsvale to care for my mom, Heidi and I developed a system of communication that has been a great benefit to us, and will benefit many others, I am sure, if we ever get the chance to share it. Without a deep sense of isolation, I don't think I would have figured the system out as my sadness and malaise forced me, among other things, to see how profoundly limited human interactions are and, eventually, why and what to do about it.

The Sartre novels I read at Wosta were lent to me by my friend, Paul, who lived on the same floor as me—the second—when I was a senior. We lived in Dabol Hall and our windows overlooked Providence Street. I became good friends with Paul, who was from Wosta, and visited his home several times.

Whenever we went there, he would always act wary as we slipped inside. The first few times, I couldn't see any reason why. His house was nice and he even had his own room on the second floor.

"Why are you boarding at the Academy when you could be living here?" I asked.

He mumbled something about his mom and dad and dropped the subject. I guessed that maybe they had to travel a lot and didn't want to leave him by himself.

One day when we went in the back door of his house, I learned why Paul acted the way he did.

As I followed him into the kitchen, I heard him say, "Uh-oh," as he looked toward one of the kitchen counters. He reached out and picked up a mostly empty quart bottle of scotch. There was just a tumbler's worth or so of amber liquid splashing along the bottom. I stared at him and the bottle, not quite comprehending.

He said, "See this? She drank it all."

"What?" I asked.

"My mother, she drank it all."

It didn't seem possible to me. That was not sherry, but a big quart of scotch whiskey.

"No way," I said. "No one could drink that much." I had drank a good deal of whiskey by that time and could not conceive of anyone finishing a whole quart.

"She can," he said, but I still didn't believe him.

"I hope she's asleep," he added softly. He motioned at me to be quiet as we headed upstairs to his room. It only occurred to me years later that Paul wanted someone else to see his mom, to see what he was going through. Like me, he had no way to explain anything to anyone and maybe no one to explain it to. For some reason, he chose me to be a witness for him. He must have sensed that both of us had less than perfect backgrounds.

After about five minutes in his room, we heard noises in the hall.

"Here she comes," Paul said. We sat quietly and listened to the sound of someone's hand rubbing along the wall of the hallway outside. I did not understand the sound of her hand until she entered—or practically fell through—the door of Paul's bedroom. Paul's mom was so drunk she could not stand up. She lurched from the doorway to the bed and sagged down next to her son. I had never seen anyone so drunk up close before. Where my mom had been animated and blushed when she drank her sherry, Paul's mom was sallow and so drunk she could not even maintain a coherent expression on her face. Her eyes looked like she was asleep.

Her words were so slurred, she was unintelligible at first. "Fraw slep nop goo, doan bid…" she slurred, or noises to that effect.

I was surprised to see her like that, but also mildly amused. She seemed completely harmless and her obliviousness to everything around her allowed me to escape the need for social interaction, which I always found unpleasant with adults.

"What are you doing here?" she asked Paul in thick tones. "Why didn't you come earlier? I was waiting for you." At that, she put her hands on his legs and started reaching for his crotch. Paul squirmed in embarrassment as I sat amazed that someone's mom could act that way toward her own son. I expected her to turn toward me and do the same thing, as Citron might have, but she stayed focused on Paul.

"Mom," he exclaimed in quiet desperation. "Stop!"

She continued, now trying to kiss him in addition to working her hands, and Paul stood up.

"We have to go now," he said to me. His mom reached toward him with a pleading gesture and whined about how he didn't love her. I felt no compunction at leaving her abruptly as we exited the room. It was a sure thing that she was going to pass out on Paul's bed within minutes.

In the kitchen, I asked Paul what had happened. He said simply that he didn't want to talk about it and we never referred to it again. I can't imagine what I might have said to make things better for him. Maybe my just seeing that helped him. We remained good friends and even drove to California together

soon after we graduated from Wosta Academy.

Chapter Fifteen

Something I only noticed much later in life is that when I was a kid I pretty much only asked other kids to sleep over at our house if I felt their family was as fucked-up as mine. The strange thing about this to me now is I did not have any significant conscious idea that my family was fucked-up. I just behaved as if I did. Kelly's father had killed himself and his poor mom raised a slew of Irish-American boys with all the rough dignity she could muster. Ergo, Kelly was cleared to spend the night at my house. Paul was now on the OK list and before long I did invite him to come to NY with me on our next vacation and spend the weekend. It is only very recently—strange as this may sound—that I realized at all that I almost never reciprocated with sleep-overs when I was a kid. Lots of boys in school invited me to their homes and I went, but rarely did I invite anyone to my home. Interestingly, Kelly never invited me to stay at his house, though I never cared about that at all. So for most of my youth, I was doing a really bad job at sealing friendships since sleep-overs were a main way kids did that. I don't know why my parents did not see what was happening; maybe they had a similar blind spot. One friend told me long after we were grown that he thought my parents wanted me to be unpopular because they saw themselves as being unpopular. It's a decent theory and worth some consideration. You could also say that, in some ways, my family was isolated due to our tiny ethnic group and that each of us was a microcosm of what happens to small societies dominated by large ones—we eventually assimilate and disappear or are driven away.

That perspective makes a good deal of Jewish behavior much more understandable. Jews comprise a group large enough to hold its own if they are tightly bound together. Not only that, but they also define themselves as a group in cultural terms and do not base their group consciousness on national borders. In contrast, European paganism was always based on a specific region. If you changed regions, you would also change which gods you paid your respects to. Christianized Europe, in turn, based its group consciousnesses on borders and groups sought power by expanding their territories as much as by strengthening their group myths. Of course, Jews now have Israel so many of them have a foot in both worlds, the national and the transnational, the geographic and the cultural. Ironically, many of their cultural myths are deeply based on geography while their transnational myths are based on contempt for geography, or at least other peoples' geography.

Paul and I took the bus to Scarsvale over a long weekend in early winter of my senior year. I was seventeen and I think he was nineteen. One of the main ways prep schools help students is they put them back a year or two, or more, so when they get to college they are much more mature than most of the other students. At the time, I did not realize that Paul was older than me since I reasoned simply that if we were in the same grade, we must be the same age.

We went to New York City and got caught in a huge snowstorm that delayed our return to Scarsvale for many hours. The next night we met Marcy who wanted to take us to a party that was happening in the Quaker Valley section of Scarsvale. Paul and I duded up as best we knew how and met Marcy at Five Corners. None of us had a car to drive, so we walked to the house where the party was going to be. Once we got there, Marcy asked us to wait in the street while she went inside to explain that she had brought two friends. Apparently we had not been specifically invited and that might matter.

It was a broad quiet street that stretched a few suburban blocks under tall overhanging trees. Paul and I smoked cigarettes and cracked jokes. We were feeling very good and looking forward to drinking and hanging out with the other kids. I felt slightly proud of myself because I thought I was showing Paul a good time—our trip to the city had been fun and now it looked like we were in for a good time at the

party. Paul and Marcy had hit it off without any awkwardness and we could also look forward to a double-date that was due on the next evening. I was very happy that Marcy had fixed Paul up with one of the most beautiful girls at Scarsvale High. I was totally in love with her myself, as I was with about twenty other girls, but was also happy with Marcy and did not know how to deal with any of those conflicting feelings except to pine, wonder, or hide them.

After about ten minutes and during our second cigarettes, a figure came out the front door of the house. Though it was cold, he left the door open so a section of incandescent light shone out onto the front walk. The boy, who I did not recognize, was clearly very drunk. Good sign, I thought as both Paul and I were in the mood to get a little drunk ourselves. The figure who had come out of the house weaved in the light, stumbled toward us, shouted incoherently into the air and then went back inside.

Then Marcy came to the door and looked out. She hurried down the path to us, and said breathlessly that it would be just a few more minutes. She didn't explain why it was taking so long and neither of us asked or cared that much. The situation did not seem all that strange, even though Marcy did appear anxious to me. "I'll be right back," she said as she turned to hurry back into the house.

Within a minute the same male figure as before came back out again. Again he weaved in the light and stumbled, this time onto the expanse of snow-covered lawn beside the front walk.

"Jews are the greatest people in the world!" he screamed.

I was quite used to hearing Jews in Scarsvale talk like that, so I actually thought it was kind of funny. In his drunken state he reeled all around the lawn and then staggered toward the road where Paul and I were standing. I was quite amused by his antics and drew nearer to him, as Paul followed me a step behind. We had been standing on the other side of the street near the curb. As we gained the center of the road and were moving closer toward him, the figure yelled at us to stop.

"Stay in the road!" he said. "Goys in the road! All goys in the road! This is a Jewish party! And no goys are allowed inside this house!"

As he continued to scream like that, some other figures appeared at the door. They, too, were drunk, but less so. At last two of them ran out onto the yard and grabbed the screaming figure to forcibly usher him inside.

"Goys in the street!" he yelled as his friends tried to hush him up.

"Shut up!" they said in intense whispers that we could hear from the street. "What do you think you're doing? Get inside and shut up!"

As the figure got closer to the door, one of the boys who was leading him back to the house broke free and came part way down the yard to speak with us.

"I'm sorry," he said. "He's just drunk. I hope you can understand."

"It's OK," I said. I really did not feel bothered at all by his words. I had been called a goy before and was well aware that Jews thought highly of themselves. In those days in Scarsvale you could hear kids saying "ain't it great to be Jewish" as often as any other greeting. I never thought much of it and saw nothing wrong with it. At Scarsvale High, I had some very good male Jewish friends who I met every morning in the boys room where we would talk about all kinds of things. I often asked them about being Jewish or what they did when they went to the temple on Wednesday nights. They explained some things and left

a lot out. I did my best to explain what little I knew of Christianity. We also talked about sports, music, girls, and many other subjects. They were the main thing I looked forward to every morning when I set out for school.

Even in twelfth-grade, at the ripe old age of seventeen, I had no idea that Jews were significantly different from Catholics or that their experiences were significantly different from mine or Kelly's. Having had little or no ethnic education or training and even less education or training in other people's ethnicities or cultures, I thought, quite reasonably, that all of us were mostly the same, with just a few customs being different here and there. Marcy never did much to change my attitudes and neither did my friends in the boys room.

The drunk guy in the snow said politely, "I think we may have to keep this party… exclusive… I mean… you *are* welcome… but just not tonight. It's a… special occasion… OK?"

I said, "Sure, no problem."

"I'll tell Marcy," he said.

I said, "OK," and turned to face Paul as the boy went back up toward the house. Paul looked shocked. His face was slightly twisted and his eyes appeared stunned.

"It's noting," I told him, hoping to salvage the evening. "We'll find something else to do."

"I don't even know what that was about," he said, obviously confused.

"I don't either," I replied, "but they have something going on… I don't know." I was getting used to being left out and estranged from old friends and social groups. "Just ignore it," I said.

We stood silently for less than a minute before Marcy came bursting out the door. "Come on," she said, clearly upset. "We are getting out of here."

We walked along quietly for five minutes or so. Marcy and I dropped well behind Paul so we could talk.

"I'm sorry the night has been ruined. Can we spend some time together alone before we go home?"

"Yes, OK," I said. "I'll ask Paul to wait for me at Five Corners."

We made arrangements with Paul and set out for a group of rocks that stood a small distance from the road where we could have some privacy. Marcy unloaded the same bitter speech she had at Berkley Pond.

"I hate them," she said. "Why can't they accept you? Or Paul? He is so nice…"

Honestly, this was the first time it hit home to me that "they" did not accept me. I had never even thought that way and had no idea how to answer. I had just thought they had some private thing going that we would not understand. It never occurred to me that I was not accepted.

"They are so mean," Marcy continued in the face of my silence. I had seen many identifiably mean Jewish faces—Rathbone in particular—but I had never thought of Jews themselves as being mean. What group of people has no meanness? My doctor, the famous Dr. Tarnower who was murdered some years later by his mistress, was a wonderful and thoughtful man. Mrs. Gold was an icon of kindness to me.

And there was Marcy and Joe and scores of kids at Scarsvale High who were always friendly and kind to me. Could it be that my being away in Wosta for the past year and a half had changed everything? Had the world itself changed?

What I didn't realize was the simple truth that as I was drifting further and further from any social group, my old friends were drifting closer and closer together into a bond that I would never be part of. Marcy, bravely and with amazing decency for her age, stood between those two forces. She saw me as a person just like her and could not bring herself to desert me or allow me to be left out of her group. I know her feelings and understanding were far advanced beyond mine on that night as we sat on the cold stones on a small hillock beside the road. I was a babe with almost no understanding while she was already wise beyond her years. Our feelings for each other were deep and our conversation went on for some time, but a profound awkwardness, an untowardness, had entered our relationship. I felt a little distant from her as I stood to go meet Paul, who was surely getting tired of waiting for me. I can only guess what Marcy felt, but I think that she must have been sensing that it would never be possible for her to live in two worlds with me, especially as I had so little understanding of either of them. I was like a stone of ignorance around her neck.

We continued to see each other and write letters after I returned to Wosta, but before spring was in full bloom we went our separate ways. Marcy wrote me that I was not paying enough attention to her and that if I didn't change, she wanted to break up. I wondered how could I pay more attention to her when I was in Wosta and she was in Scarsvale. Even I could understand that her words meant more than she had said. I wrote back that maybe it was best for us to break up because I didn't see what more I could do. For me, the whole thing was very confusing. I understood neither her, myself, Scarsvale, or Wosta. At that point I was as isolated as I had even been. When my mom learned of our break-up, she didn't say a word, but she looked at me very knowingly.

When I left Marcy that night, I slowly ran to Five Corners to meet Paul. He was standing where we had agreed, pacing back and forth in the cold. I suggested we call my house to see if my sister Mira's boyfriend, who was also staying at our house for the weekend, would come and pick us up.

"I think my sister went somewhere without him. It's a three-mile walk and he might be willing," I explained to Paul.

"Sure give it a try," he said.

There was a payphone just inside the Piedmont Inn that we were able to use. My sister's friend, who had a very cool Land Rover, came to get us. He was both jaunty at being outside for the drive and despondent because my sister had ditched him for a party she was going to. Later she explained to me that she didn't really like him all that much. I wondered why she had invited him home. I also felt that his situation in some ways explained my own. Getting ditched by a girl or tossed out of a party was normal, I supposed. I think Paul had the same reaction because we had a good time just talking for the rest of that evening.

One wrinkle came when we got back. My mom was in the living room knitting as we entered the front door. She called to me and I went over to where she was sitting while Paul went upstairs.

"Tommy," she said. "What are you doing to yourself?"

I said, "what?" in serious disbelief. Did she know about our being refused entry to the party? Had Marcy called her?

"You know," she said, looking very severe. "At your age what are you doing going into the Piedmont Inn?"

There was my mom—she was accusing me of something I hadn't done in order to prevent me from doing anything like it ever. I was astonished that she said that, but not really surprised.

"Mom, I went in to make a phone call."

"Jim said that he was going to meet you at the Inn. Tommy, you are too young to be drinking and spending time in places like that."

I was deeply irritated and frustrated at this point. It took many more years before I would learn how to finesse bullshit like that.

"Mom, we were *not* drinking! I went into the Inn for about three minutes to call Jim, and that's it."

She stared at me some more and wagged her head in a pantomime of disappointment. "Please, stay out of places like that," she said. "You are too young."

I was fuming by this point but just turned and left without saying another word. My father looked at me over his reading glasses as I passed by the red room on my way upstairs. He was sitting in his big chair with a reading light behind him. Neither of us said anything, but I surmised that he must have had some idea of what my mom had been up to. He had probably heard most of what she said since she had been facing toward him.

The next night, Paul and I went to Marcy's and spent the entire evening there. Our friend, Dora, arrived alone and spent the night with us, being very kind to Paul the whole time. I have to admit that I had a huge crush on Dora. She was a stunning beauty and had always been very friendly to me. The shadowy wedge that had developed between Marcy and me the night before allowed part of me to cleave off and generate even stronger feelings for Dora. I felt somewhat jealous of Paul as the two of them talked together. At that age, I had very few social skills, so I had no idea how to talk to Dora without offending Marcy or Paul.

It has occurred to me that I offended Marcy anyway and that she had written to break up with me due to her seeing that I had feelings for Dora and not because of what had happened the night before. How can we ever know?

When we got back to Wosta, Paul started getting letters from Dora. He told me about them but never showed them to me. Years later, another friend told me that Dora was writing to Paul because she hoped that I would write to her. She had liked me, too. It was torture to have heard that about Dora. And it bothered me for years. After that night at Marcy's I never saw her again.

I wonder if my mom sensed that any of this was happening to me. If she did, she did nothing to help, though I don't know what she could have done had she tried. She drove Paul and me back to Wosta on Sunday. When she dropped us off, she said that she was going to visit some of the textile mills that were still operating in Wosta. When Heidi and I moved in with her so many years later, we were to discover that she had many drawers and closets filled with linen cloth. Some of the pieces were small and some were very large. Carol told us that though her collection was not worth very much money, it was a unique one in that she had many fine examples of American-made linen. When we were kids, she had

made curtains, table cloths, napkins, and hand towels out of some of her linens. The rest of her collection —far more than she ever could have used—had been stored away in closets and drawers for her to contemplate, I suppose, when she needed a small lift.

"You have to collect *something*, Tommy," she informed on one of our drives to Wosta Academy. "Everyone should have a collection."

It was another frustrating conversation for me because my input was not regarded as being on topic. "OK, I will collect guitars. How's that?"

"*Guitars?*" she said. "No, it has to be something small. You can't collect *guitars*."

"Yes, you can," I said. "They cost more but over the years you can collect a bunch of them."

"I don't think so, Tommy. That's not a real collection. You need something that you can just pick up wherever you are."

"Mom, you have to drive all the way to Wosta or Connecticut to get your fabrics," I argued.

"Yes, but I go through those areas all the time. And I can find fabrics and other things I collect in many places." In addition to her fabrics, my mom also had a large collections of antique coffee pots, roosters, etchings, folk art, jewelry, black people dolls, and religious icons.

"Honestly, mom, sometimes I think you are crazy."

"Now, don't be fresh," she said tensing her lips.

Just before another drive to Wosta when I was still rooming with Joe who had not been kicked out yet, Joe and I were talking outside as we waited for my mom to come down from the house on Circle Road. Joe's mom had dropped him off to ride with us to Wosta. We had started school only a few months before.

"Joe," I said. "When my mom's in the car, let's act psyched to be going back to school," even though we both hated being there.

"Why?" he asked. "We both hate the fucking place."

"I know," I said. "But I don't want to make her feel bad. If she thinks we like it, she will feel better about taking us there."

That Joe understood what I meant explains a lot about why we were such good friends. One of the few people who know this story told me that mine were the classic words and behaviors of an abused child: "No one who was not abused would ever think to say or do anything like that. It's one way psychologists can really tell who is or was being abused. As a kid, you are a pure victim and you know no other state. So abused kids often defend their abusers fiercely."

I sort of accepted that explanation for a few years, but I don't any longer. I think the better explanation is my mom was a rule-based, categorical thinker. In her mind, I was her kid; going to a private school was good; therefore nothing was wrong. If I showed some enthusiasm for where I was going, she would feel good. Why shouldn't I want my mom to feel good even if I felt like shit the whole time I was at that school? The sum total of what she was doing might be classifiable as "abusive" in some ways, but I don't think that that is what she was actually doing. She was simply at the limit of her ability to reason

existentially. The categories looked right, the rules were right, she felt "in control," so all was well. To boot, I even appeared happy about going back to school. Why Joe was so able to go along with that and understand it so quickly, I can't say for sure. It may have had something to do with the cultural misfitting between his mom, who was Jewish, and his dad, who was not. Also, it's true that virtually all kids who get sent to boarding school feel at some level that their parents are sending them away because they don't love them.

In a later chapter, I will tell the amazing story about how I found out so many things about my mom and other people and why some people knew so much about what was happening to me at that time. For now, as we rode in the car back to school, it was just Joe and me, talking it up to my mom till it felt so surreal it gave me a slight out-of-body experience.

"I'm sort of psyched to be going back to WA," I said.

"Me too," he replied, giving me one of his huge playful grins, mixed with sadness. He was in the back seat while I was turned toward him in the passenger's seat up front. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my mom smiling with satisfaction as she overheard us.

"The weather is cold, but we can still do a lot of stuff outside," I continued.

"I know," Joe said. "And we can go to Grogan's after school." Grogan's Spa was a small market geared toward selling hot sandwiches, comics, candy, and sundries to the boys at Wosta Academy. Years later, the school became co-ed, but in those days it was all boys. Since many of the students had been left back a year or more, Wosta Academy had one of the best high school football and basketball teams in New England. I dreaded seeing many of those players, some of whom had deep voices and were much bigger and older than me. A couple of them were very nice, though, so it wasn't all bad. One friend who was a first-rate athlete used to lift weights with me every night. His palling around with me probably saved me a fight or two because everyone knew we were friends.

"I wonder what Dugan will assign us," I said.

"That jerk," Joe commented.

"Why do you say he's a jerk?" my mom asked.

"Everybody hates him," Joe said. It was Dugan's car that Joe did something to, which got him kicked out of school, along with the pot allegations, a few months later.

At school, I went along with the crowd of students or didn't oppose it on the subject of Dugan even though I liked him as a teacher. He taught English, swore in class, and clearly enjoyed literature. His downfall came because he was also lived in our dorm, Dabol Hall. Dugan was a smart, witty man and he could not resist commenting constantly about the state of the dorm and the resident students, whom he often called "animals in their cages."

He was adept at quick character summations and sharp comments. One night as I was lying in bed when he came in to check our room, he said to me, "You don't belong in this shithole, Tom. Why don't you get out?" I stared at him aghast. How the hell was I supposed to get out? I wish I had followed his advice, though. A the time, I merely rolled over on my side and felt utterly miserable.

It turned out that Dugan actually liked me and hence his sharp comment. But being liked by Dugan was not a good thing for me at all. On his last day of school after being forced to resign, I skipped his class because I had a terrible headache and felt like shit, as I so often did then. I suppose another factor was I didn't hate the guy and was sorry to see him go. I admired his conspicuous intelligence and willingness to speak the truth, even though it hurt. Anyway, when the students from his class came back into the dorm, they strode in as a group, enveloped in an almost demented silence. They were furious at him even more than they had been during the period when they were trying to get him kicked out. Apparently he had spent the entire class tearing them apart with his sharp wits.

I tried to get them to say what had happened, but they just growled and cussed, throwing their arms down in revulsion and stamping around as if trying to exorcise whatever Dugan had put into them. At last, one student, still stunned at the insults Dugan had hurled at them, told me that during his onslaught he had praised me and said I was the "most intelligent" student in the school. A small part of me was pleased that he had said that about me, but a much larger part knew that praise from Dugan was tantamount to being tarred and feathered, which was essentially what my fate was going to be with that group. The student who told me that looked at me in disbelief. Disbelief not about what Dugan had said but *that* he had said it, for he knew full well that Dugan's words had pulled me across a line I would never recross again. I knew it, too, and left the group without saying another word.

Joe had already been kicked out of school by that time. I returned to my empty room and regretted not having been able to summon the courage, as I had intended, to go to the principal and defend him. I had a whole speech planned in my mind and even imagined the principal and a few teachers sitting at a long table listening to me. The trouble was, I also imagined them annihilating me when I finished. Additionally, I was every bit as envious of Joe as I was disappointed that I was going to lose my best friend. I had seen so many people get ostracized and so many friendships fall apart by that time that I was wary of doing anything about anything. It seemed that intervening often produced results that were worse than not intervening. I did not trust teachers, doctors, coaches, most groups, or my own family. The only way I knew how to handle situations like that was to withdraw from them. I have wondered how different my life would have been had my mother never taken me to Mountebank, but that is an idle pursuit, wondering about what might have been. The paradox of life is that had even one thing been changed, we might not be here today. The past is where we have come from and to change it in any way means we won't be where we are now and might not exist at all.

After Joe was kicked out, we got together whenever I was back in Scarsvale. I could tell many stories about those days and the things we did, but since they have little to do with my mom, I will save them for another time. The one thing that did bear on my relationship with her is she and my father both knew that Joe had been kicked out of school for smoking pot. My parents despised cigarettes, and pot, to them, was a hundred times worse. Both of them gave me rides to Joe's house—reluctantly—in a car filled with their innocent foreboding. "Don't smoke anything over there," my father said to me once as we neared Joe's home. My mom, for her part, would give me her typical guilt-by-association expression as she wagged her head. In retrospect, I suppose I should compliment my parents for driving me to Joe's at all. Those were the days of "reefer madness" and I am sure my parents thought that smoking pot was a short ride to the madhouse.

Of course we did smoke pot. We went to some trees across the street from his house and smoked as much as we could get. Even in those days we could see that the main harm that came from it was the huge cultural divisions it caused between different generations and segments of society. The social repercussions were far worse than the drug itself, which has only a moderate influence on most people.

Pot caused me trouble in this way with one of the last people who remained friends with me in Scarsvale. At some point I told this friend, Mark, that I had smoked pot. No one in his circle had ever tried it, so he asked me a lot of questions about it, which I answered. As mentioned elsewhere, in those days I had no idea that other kids actually talked with their parents. In a million years it would never have occurred to me that Mark would repeat what I said to his mother, which he did.

So, in a sort of sneaky way, knowing everything I had said to Mark, his mom asked me about pot one day as she drove me and Mark along School Lane.

I remember blithely spewing a string of clichés at her, lying through my teeth.

"It's kind of sad," I said from the backseat of her car, "because the kids that smoke pot are the ones who need the most help." Stuff like that. Oddly enough, though I was lying, I was also telling a big part of the truth. I probably did need help more than others. She did not let on that she knew the whole story. Mark squirmed a little but I did not understand why. The upshot was that was the last time I saw him. I didn't figure out what had happened until years later when the mysterious stranger spoke to me and told me Mark's side of the story. I will have more to say about the mysterious stranger a little further along.

Pot, one of the few things that made my headaches go away or let me feel good for a while, had destroyed my friendship with Mark and was slowly corroding the one I had with Joe. Of course, it wasn't the pot that was to blame, but only how people perceived it, and how they perceived me.

At the time, I only vaguely understood the second part of that statement, but its deep truth was beginning to penetrate from many angles—I was becoming isolated at Wosta Academy, I had been sent there for reasons I knew not, I was losing friends in Scarsvale and New Rochelle for smoking pot, and I was being driven away from my girlfriend and all of our mutual friends because I was not Jewish, a goy. As ever, I had nowhere to turn and no idea what to do about any of it.

Chapter Sixteen

Before I leave the subject of Joe, I want to mention that he was very good to me. He didn't know what had happened to me or where I stood. His father was an announcer on TV and had very smooth manners and an approachable mien. His mom was nice too. One day when I was over there, I bought a hunting knife off his brother to give to my brother for Christmas. Later, he and his brother ran around stealing mail from their neighbors' mailboxes. They tore open the Christmas cards looking for money, laughing as they threw the messages on the ground. We were standing among the tress on the other side of the road from his house. At one point, Joe looked up from an envelope he was ripping and saw that it pained me to watch him steal the money and destroy the cards.

He said, "It's just a few cards and not much money" as a way of excusing himself.

I said, "But people might not know that they were sent at all."

"They can talk on the phone," he said.

"Maybe they won't," I replied. He became aware that his actions might truly damage the relationships of other people and stopped what he was doing.

"OK, maybe you are right. Let's go put these back," he said to his brother. The two of them then ran across the street and returned the unopened mail to the mailboxes. When they came back, his brother gave me a judgmental look as if I had spoiled a good time, but Joe looked at me with real feeling and

understanding. I think, partly, because his father was not Jewish and his mother was, he had extra sensitivity to cultural or moral boundaries and more sympathy for people like me who were also caught between Jewish and non-Jewish culture. Another friend of ours, a girl who I had had a crush on for years was in a similar situation to Joe—her father was not Jewish and her mom was. I think both she and Joe had more understanding of me than almost anyone because my position somewhat reflected the positions their fathers were in. Joe's father always seemed like a happy man. But Barbara's dad did not. The few times I went to her house, her father stayed in a den by himself and never came out or spoke to anyone. Her mom was outgoing and very friendly, but her father seemed miserable. Years, later the mysterious stranger explained to me that that is often the fate of non-Jewish men who marry Jewish women, a fate he said I may have been fortunate to avoid. In those days, the child of a Jewish woman was a Jew by birth and fully accepted in that community, but the non-Jewish father was not. The mysterious stranger told me, "We are a cult. We're the oldest cult in the world. What can we do? We can't change. People who get close to us can get hurt. It's a big problem."

During the summers between tenth and eleventh and eleventh and twelfth grades, I worked as a caddy at the Scarsvale Golf Club. It was my mom's idea. I don't know why she thought that would be a good place for me to work since both she and my father thought golf was a ridiculous game and they had never been invited to join the Scarsvale Golf Club, despite having a good many friends who were members. After I went in to ask the caddy master if I could work there that summer and getting his assent to let me "try it out," my mom, who had been waiting in the car some distance away, decided to go in and have a word with him.

"Mom's it's all arranged," I said as I got in the car.

"I just want to say a few things to him," my mom said as she closed her door and went to the caddy shack.

She came back a few minutes later, looking a bit too officious for my tastes, but otherwise composed.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing," she answered. "I just wanted to meet him."

I never gave the incident much thought, but I spent two lousy years carrying golf bags under the jaundiced eye of that caddy master. Maybe it was me, maybe it was my mom, I don't know. But I always was given the worst people, who tipped the least and had the heaviest bags. The work gave me a sturdy frame, though, and some insight into blue collar New York. Some of the older caddies claimed Mafia connections and one young dude was adamant that I was a fool.

"You going to college?" he asked one day.

"Yes, I am," I said.

"You an idiot. See, I don't need no college because I got connections. I am *in* with the right people. I already quit high school cuz I don't need that bullshit." He had the strongest and angriest face I have ever seen on a teenager. He wasn't angry at me. That's just how he looked out on the world. He had curly rusty blond hair and I'm pretty sure he was Irish-American. I have no doubt that he was entering a criminal organization, either as a thug for the Italian mafia or as a member of one of the Irish gangs in southern New York. In those days, J. Edgar Hoover was still denying the existence of organized crime anywhere in America, but everyone in that part of New York knew the Mafia existed and was a major factor in New York society.

One day, when I left the golf course to go home, I waited for my mom to pick me up at a nearby gas station. I sat on a stone wall out in front of the station swinging my legs and bouncing my heels off the stones. I waited for a long time, well over forty minutes, but my mom never showed. After ten more minutes, I started to get really mad at her. At this point my friend, Jim Boylan, appeared and asked me what I was doing. I was seething mad by now.

"Waiting for my mom," I said.

Jim had no idea how I felt or why. "Why not come over to my place and play some snooker?" he asked.

"I can't," I said. "I have to wait for my mom."

"How long have you been waiting?"

"A long time," I said scowling.

"Maybe she's not coming. Why not come over and call her from my house?"

I wish I had said yes and done that, but I didn't want my mom to show up and not find me.

"I can't," I said. "She'll get mad at me if she comes while we are walking to your place."

"Well, she isn't coming on time so why do you have to wait?"

Good thinking, Jim. I should have left right then, just as I should have quit school at sixteen and moved to California, or quit college in my junior year and moved to Montana, or followed the nurse's advice and avoided Mountebank. I had no idea how to seize control of my own life.

"She'll just get really mad at me and it will cause problems," I said.

We talked for a while longer, but I was in a horrible mood and Jim soon left.

"Doesn't look like she's coming at all," he said as he walked away. The mysterious stranger told me about Jim, too. Apparently, Jim's parents were truly neglectful. He almost never saw them and resented them deeply. It was part of the reason he tried more than once to be friends with me; he must have sensed a similarity in our backgrounds. As I have said, I do not believe my mom was an abusive person, but her style of mothering compared to much of Scarsvale could fit that category if you pushed. If I had gone off with Jim, we might have had a very important conversation, one that freed both of us from the gloom of our unfulfilling teenage years.

When I was at Scarsvale High, I often sat with Jim at lunch. Every day he had exactly the same thing—a tuna sandwich, a bag of Fritos, and a can of apple juice that had been taken from the freezer that morning and so was still cold. Again, we didn't know how to speak so I never knew until much later that Jim hated his lunches, which never changed. And what he didn't know is that I hated mine. The food was right there in front of us and we could easily have started talking about it more deeply, but we didn't. That is a common occurrence even among adults. The deep reality is right there, right in front of you, but you can't or won't or don't mention it, and this may go on for years, until one day you no longer have a chance to mention it any more.

The last time I saw Jim was at Barbara's on New Years Eve of my senior year. He came over for a while, seeming very despondent, and then left. It was another occasion when I did not understand that he felt more like me than probably anyone else in that town.

Barbara was great that night. She was one of the best talkers I have ever known. Not only was her speech fluid and easy, but her tone of voice was utterly beautiful. I loved hearing her talk and never even cared what she was talking about. We sat on the couch in her living room for a long time and played some game like little kids under a table. When it got really late, her mom came into the room and asked me if I wanted to spend the night. I could tell Barbara wanted me to stay as did her mom, but it felt awkward to me to spend the night at a girl's house. How would I explain it to my parents?

"There's plenty of room," her mom said.

I wish I had stayed, but I didn't. As I walked home around two in the morning, another friend drove up in his Corvette and asked if I wanted a ride. This person had stood and watched two of his Jewish friends jump me at Saxon Woods swimming pool one day years before, so I had mixed feelings about him. He was one of the first people I noticed when I entered Junior High and I remember being very impressed with his confident bearing and nice clothes. The fight, which they had started without warning and which completely surprised me because I thought they were approaching me to have a friendly talk, was still in the back of my mind. I am sure it was another aspect of the Jewish non-Jewish divide I ran into so many times, though at the time I was not aware of that. "No, it's OK," I said. "I can walk home."

"Are you sure?" He said from the dark inside his car which idled loudly in the quiet night. His face was turned to the side to speak with me and seemed more vulnerable than I had ever seen it before. I honestly didn't know what to do or say. Today, I am aware that maybe he was sorry about that stupid fight and wanted to make it up to me. But on that night I just floated among the nothingness reflected in my mind, lost in the spaces between many worlds. "I'm alright," I said before I watched him drive off into the dark alone.

In addition to what I have described, I should say that I was truly playing with less than a full deck in those days. The long aftermath that followed Mountebank was nowhere near over and one experience after another was adding to my sense of utter and complete isolation from everyone and everything. I had few friends, and fewer social skills so I didn't even know how to keep the ones I had. I can very well understand how it is that so many people in this world get on a downward spiral and are never able to get back. Bret's father's suicide, Dugan causing his own ostracism, and my own long series of flops and set-backs all were cumulative events, with one small thing leading to another. Just as I had no idea how to talk to Jim or Barbara or Joe or anyone else, so many people have no idea how to step in and stop snowballing events once they get going. In many ways, I can surely blame Mountebank for everything, and no one who does not understand that can possibly understand me, but what brought her to that abject position? Was it being in the "oldest cult in the world" or did she have parents like Jim's? And if a line of doctors stood in the hall to watch me leave sadly, how many others had there been?

Eventually most adults learn how crazy this world is and how mad most people are. I was just learning it in my way. As I walked home in the cold that night, almost the whole way on one long dark street, I sensed, though only vaguely, that reality has many layers and many levels and that I was being torn apart by forces I could not begin to comprehend.

Chapter Seventeen

The day I missed a good chance to become better friends with Jim while I was waiting in front of the gas station, I eventually called my mom on a payphone.

"Well, I did *try* to get there," she answered breezily, "but the road was closed."

"The road was closed? Are you serious?" I fumed. I had been waiting well over an hour.

"Well, I thought you could just walk home, so I turned around."

"How was I supposed to know that?" I asked. It was a three-mile walk from the golf course to our house.

"Well, I'll come get you now. But you have to meet me up on Fox Meadow Road a few blocks in. You will see where the road is blocked."

"OK," I said.

I walked up to the designated spot and just got angrier at her. She could easily have turned onto a side street and gone around the roadblock, which had been put in place for a tree that was being removed.

When my mom pulled up, maintaining what appeared to be her breezy manner, I became really furious at her.

It was the most angry I have ever been at her before or since. It was obvious to me that the roadblock was a contrived excuse and that she had deliberately left me to wait for nothing. I also knew she knew that if I had not been there waiting for her (had she come) she would have gotten mad at me for that. This was a time long before cell phones, so if you made arrangements to meet, people usually waited a long time. I had even become worried about her because I thought she might have been hurt.

As I got in the car, I also sensed that she had been drinking. She wasn't drunk, but she wasn't sober either.

"You see what I mean?" she said, indicating the small suburban road block. Her eyes affected a half-lidded pose of fake innocence.

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "You could just go up Ehrlich Street right there. It's one block to go around that."

She gave a breezy smile and said, "Oh, I never thought of that."

I felt certain she was lying and lost my temper at that point and started swearing at her. I called her a fucking bitch, an asshole, a jerk, and probably more. Then I just sat and stewed. She acted hugely upset that I was swearing at her like that, which was something entirely unprecedented. I don't believe I ever called her a bad name before or after that.

She cried on the way home and I just didn't care though I figured there would be more drama soon enough. And sure enough there was. She raced inside crying when we got back while I walked around the yard to cool off. When I came in, my father was in the kitchen. He approached me and said, "Tommy, your mother is very upset. She said you swore at her. I think you better go apologize to her."

I didn't bother making an excuse, but just left the room. I could see that my father was being conciliatory and hoping the situation would blow over. I have little to say about that but wish he had at least asked for my side of the story.

I went to the sun porch where she was sitting and told her I was sorry. She was sobbing loudly, her upper body shaking with the effort of breathing. "No you're not," she wailed. "You hate me! You don't love me…"

All I could think of was how am I supposed to love you when you act like that? I acted as nice as I could but also hated myself for buying into her bullshit.

"Nobody loves me," she continued sobbing as I left the room in quiet disgust.

Looking back now I wonder what had been going on with her. I don't think she had had a fight with my father or was deflecting anger toward me from something else, and I also do not remember anything that I might have done to make her act in such a passive aggressive manner.

What had caused the breezy attitude she maintained on the phone and in the car until I started swearing? It was not entirely unusual for her to smile slightly when she was being a bit mean or disciplining me. But whenever she had acted like that in the past, she had only maintained something resembling the breezy thing for a few seconds. It was very irritating and debasing to see her do that, but she had done it only rarely and never for long. My guess now is that her attitude was affected by booze. She had been a bit drunk and just felt like being nasty to me. It was a rare occurrence and one that was never repeated, not at that length or intensity and/or not to my face. Who knows, though, maybe she really did have an abusive streak and I just don't want to admit it.

The only other behaviors that resembled that one were a few times when I was considerably younger, she broke down in front of me and said the same words exactly—"Nobody loves me."

She didn't say them in response to anything I had done, I am sure of that. She just said them out of the blue and when no one else was around. It was like a thunder storm building and finally breaking. When I tried comforting her with kind words, she had always responded in the same way, "No you don't. You *don't* care about me. Nobody does."

She did this three or four times when I was young, before the age of twelve. The last time it happened we were in our front hall at Circle Road. She sat on the stairs to the second floor and started crying her eyes out for no reason I could see. I stood in front of her and when I reached out to touch her arm, she pulled it back but looked at me through her tears. I saw some kind of comprehension in her eyes. Maybe I had given her what she wanted. Her tears stopped and she said that she was going to go upstairs to freshen up. We never discussed the incident again. That would have been around the time that I went to the kitchen almost every evening to talk to her about books, or anything at all. The paradox is I was offering her love almost every day and yet she was not able to receive it.

I see that as a category mistake on her part. She thought of me as her kid and that I must express love in some predetermined way. But when I offered her the real thing complete with the desire to communicate deeply with her, she couldn't do it. Love didn't mean sharing time and talking in the kitchen before dinner. It meant something else to her, though I have no idea what that could have been.

It all seems pretty sad to me today. But that's how it was. Neither my mom nor I knew how to bridge the gap between us at that time.

I never knew what the repercussions of my swearing at her in the car were. Did she remain angry with me for a long time? Did she withhold something from me that I might have received from her? I don't know. It could be that my outburst led to her signing me up for a dish-washing job at Gurney's Inn in Montauk Long Island the next summer soon after I graduated from Wosta Academy.

I actually met and went drinking with Liberace while I worked at Gurney's Inn, though I had no idea who he was until afterward. He was performing at the Inn. I washed dishes from five in the afternoon til the dining room closed. The cooks in the kitchen never once allowed me to look into the dining room, so

I never saw and never knew that Gurney's Inn was a gay hangout.

Eventually, my mother, my father, and I gathered in the kitchen for dinner after the roadblock incident. I don't know where my siblings were. My mom's eyes were reddened from crying and the meal was strained. I honestly did not care at that point what my mother thought or felt. I believed it was all her fault and that I had been forced into a demeaning role that I could not escape. My father was being very nice about everything. He was uncharacteristically talkative and pleasant, and I did appreciate that.

That incident was a good example of the terrible communication that characterized almost everything in my world. I was trapped, my mom's behavior was unexplained, my father's conciliations were based on emotion and not knowledge, and worst of all, there would never be any way to understand what had really happened. Was the evening in the street with Paul and Marcy any different? Or my failure to understand Jim? Or the students' hatred of Dugan?

Dugan was mainly joking in a sharp, witty way. His comments could hurt, but so what? They were also funny and largely true, and worst of all, I think most of the students knew that at the time. What were Paul and Marcy feeling and why couldn't we retrieve those moments and get to the bottom of them? Why did Marcy wander off after that night and why did Paul never speak of it to me again, just as he had never spoken again about his mother's drunken advances?

Chapter Eighteen

What happened with Liberace was this. He took me and another guy who worked at Gurney's Inn to a gay bar one night after work. The place was at the end of a long dirt road in the middle of nowhere. In those days, being gay was still something people hid. I had no idea we were going to a gay bar or that Liberace was gay. Minus the fancy clothes and stage persona, which I had never seen, he was a very down to earth person.

We parked in a dirt parking lot. The sky and everything around us was dark since nothing else was out there. Once inside, I began to suspect that it was a gay bar but wasn't sure. As per the times and my dim wits, I felt a gathering sense of embarrassment as we ordered our beers. There were not many customers in the bar, so everyone would notice whatever happened. The bartender and waiters were wearing tight shorts with suspenders. There were no women in the room.

When a guy from one of the booths came up and asked me to dance, I was mortified. I mumbled my refusal, indicating that I was with Ted, as Liberace called himself, and the other worker from the Inn, whose name was Ronald. The man left and I felt terrible. Liberace was very considerate and maneuvered us out of the bar shortly after that.

In the car on the way back down the dirt road, he asked me what my ethnicity was. I said Polish because even at that late date I didn't know I was more Lithuanian than Polish. Liberace said in reply, almost under his breath, "This is what always happens to the Polish guys…"

I was sitting in the back seat and felt oddly comforted by his saying that. I learned long after that night that Liberace himself was half Polish.

Liberace represented another kind of division or mystery I did not understand.

The outing with him happened because the other worker at Gurney's who went with us was a friend I went drinking with almost every night after work. Ronald was black, gay, and a waiter at the Inn. Since he knew Liberace from being in the dining room, it was fairly natural for the three of us to get together

after closing.

Ronald, was a lot of fun to hang out with. He cracked good jokes and knew many of the people in the area, or at least at the bars we went to after work. I never went to a gay bar with him before the night described above or after, so his gayness was just something about him as was his being black. Didn't seem to make much difference to either of us.

In light of what I just said, you may wonder why I felt mortified at the bar with Liberace. It was because my impressions of the room were claustrophobic and overwhelming. And the long drive down the dark dirt road and the dark parking lot were creepy, if not outright scary.

Being gay, black, white, Christian, Jewish, Chinese, Polish, cross-eyed, or whatever seemed like small things to me in those days. What I did not understand at that time was that most people make a very big deal over small things.

There is probably a principle of math or physics involved in that—even a very small tendency, say, for atoms to group in one place eventually leads to huge masses of them grouping into stars and planets. In game theory, even a very small group with dedicated aims can move a very large group that is apathetic. Among humans, even something as unimportant as hair color, a chipped tooth, or a short skirt can have large repercussions.

I suppose you can teach or train kids to be more aware, but I bet the end result of that training will not produce a major difference. They might be "sensitive" to whatever their trainers wanted, but they will be insensitive to a great many other things, just as I was. Ignorant youth probably constitutes a limit on how enlightened a culture can be. Ignorance and the slow maturation of the human brain probably explains why all world cultures are deficient in morals and wisdom. I don't believe there are any good cultures anywhere in the world, to be honest.

On one of our trips to the Chinese restaurant before Heidi and I moved back to care for my mom, she raised the subject of how she had failed to understand me. "I am so sorry," she said. "I don't know what I was thinking. I was just trying to be fair…"

"What do you mean mom?" I asked as I watched her face tense and move with real feeling and real thought.

"Well, I just didn't understand you is what I mean…"

I waited expectantly, not wanting to say anything to derail her train of thought.

"For one thing, I always thought that you and your brother should have the same treatment. That both of you should be treated in the same way…"

"Yes, I remember," I said.

"But you're not the same! Not at all!" she exclaimed in an uncharacteristically plaintive tone that became briefly shrill. "You are three years older than Pep! And your interests are completely different!"

"That's true," I said with some satisfaction. Her giving us the same treatment in almost all things while we were growing up had often bothered me.

"I used to make you two go to bed at the same time, but you were much older than Pep!"

"Yes, you did," I said.

"I should have treated you each according to how you were. Oh, I am so sorry about that. It just wasn't right. I don't know why I thought that."

"It's OK, mom," I said. "You had an idea and stayed with it. I think it was wrong, too. But it's OK and there is nothing we can do about it now."

"You were such a happy baby," she mused, "…but then you had a mother like me…"

"You are being much too hard on yourself," I said.

"The thing was, Tommy, your father and I always thought that life was so easy. It was so easy for us, we didn't think there was any need to teach any of you anything, really."

I nodded. It was something she had said before.

"And I guess we didn't think there was any need for us to learn anything either… I am sorry to say that we used to have contempt for many people, people who were different from us."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, not long ago I saw Bill Clinton's mother on TV. We used to think people like that were stupid. That hair and the cigarettes, and getting divorced or whatever happened. We just thought people like that were lazy or stupid… But now I think she was *smarter* than me!"

I could remember a few instances when we traveled across country by car watching my parents react with disbelief at some of the people we ran into in restaurants or stores. They seemed to have especial contempt for slow-moving, slow-talking white people, and especially if the women had beehive hair-dos or the men wore T-shirts and combed their hair like Elvis. Hair was a big problem between me and my parents when I got to college because I wore it long, in the style of the times, and they couldn't understand why or accept it. Not a huge thing, but yet another static symbol that divides people. I could write a long essay on the hair-dos and hats of my family. Hair is the quintessential symbol of the head, and thus of the person. So beehives bothered my mom, while Elvis cuts and later sixties-style long hair bothered my dad, who personally cut my hair until I was in high school.

It made me laugh out loud to hear my mom describe Clinton's mother and allow that maybe she had been smarter than her, a lot smarter. Though there was an undercurrent of criticism of me, I didn't care. How else could she say what she felt? That's the sort of thing mothers see and I didn't blame her for it.

"It cracks me up to hear you say that," I said.

"I always thought that people like that who spent hours talking with their sons were… crazy. I didn't see what there was to talk about. Now, I see the world is more complex for you than it was for us… People even tried to tell me. Do you remember Mrs. Barnes?"

"Yes," I said. She was a woman who had lived next door to us.

"She even *said* to your father one night that he was 'filling your head with nonsense'."

"She did?"

"Yes, we were over there for drinks. She came right out and said it. She said, 'It's such a complex world, Tom, and you are filling his head with nonsense. There is not enough time for that.' Those are her exact words."

"What did dad say?"

"He didn't say much. But we didn't think that she knew what she was talking about, but she did. And the minister at church used to say things like that, too."

"Like what?" I asked.

"That there are 'some people in this congregation who are not paying enough attention to their children and that there will be problems…'"

"He said that to you?"

"No, no. He wouldn't have dared to say it directly to me, but he said it to everyone… during the sermon. At the time, I thought he meant someone else, but now I think he must have meant me! And maybe a few others. He could see what was happening."

"It is amazing for me to hear you say stuff like this. Did you get all this from those sessions with your friends?"

"A lot of it, yes. It started me thinking in a way I never had before. All my life, I had never realized that people talk like that…

"Tommy, do you know what your father did for a living?"

"Yes," I said. "He was a patent attorney."

"Yes, and…" she paused and waited.

"What do you mean? He was a lawyer in New York City. He practiced patent law. I guess he also took other kinds of cases. Is that what you mean?"

"No. He was also a professor at NYU. He taught law." She looked at me in utter disbelief. It was a disbelief in herself even more than me. "How could you not know what your father did for a living?"

"I knew he taught there, but it was just an occasional night class, I thought."

"No, he became a full professor in the law school. And he was so proud of that. Don't you remember all those students who came in the evening when you were staying at home before you went to China?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"Who did you think they were?" she asked, clearly dumbfounded that I did not know.

"I thought they were people from the church. I didn't really know why they were coming over."

"They were his students from NYU! Many of them have called me since your father died and told me how much his advice has helped them. But you are his son and he never told you anything."

"You didn't tell me either," I said.

"I know," she replied, looking downcast. "How could that be! How can a son not even know what his father does for a living and how could *I* never have said anything to you either?"

"I don't know, mom," I said, and I really did not.

Later that day, she told me that one of my father's friends had called her shortly after his death just to tell her that he "had always liked Tom very much. That he was a great guy and a lot of fun, but that you (my mom) are a nasty bitch and I never want to have anything to do with you again."

My mom looked at me with amazement and great disappointment. "Can you believe that?" she asked. "He hated me so much he had to call and say that. He couldn't just ignore me."

I had met the man a few times. He was a red-headed engineer who was full of energy and ideas. My father had helped him get some patents and the two of them often met for lunch and conversation. He seemed a little eccentric to me because he talked very fast and jumped from idea to idea.

I can recall watching my father sitting at his desk in his office in New York City as Lester gesticulated beside him, expounding away on some theory or other, maybe concerning European symphonic music. I could tell that my father was enjoying the cascade of words coming from Lester. He smiled with pleasure and looked toward me affecting a slightly helpless expression. What can I do with someone like this except listen to him and enjoy it?

For her part, my mom had described Lester as a "nut" on several occasions, so I could understand his phone call to her. He had been categorized badly and that had smarted and he had responded brutally once my father died. Sometimes I wonder why my mom confided so many unflattering details to me. I suppose she wanted to tell someone and it might as well be me. Her telling me stories like that had a dual effect on me. On the one hand, I sort of looked down on her for eliciting that kind of treatment from anyone. But on the other, I respected her for being brave or self-effacing enough to tell me about it without embellishment or any apparent desire to explain it away. My sister Mira has a similar trait—she can be deeply honest about herself, so honest you wonder why she would say that. Bad advertisements for herself, as Mailer might have put it. As you lose respect for their having said it, you also gain respect for the same reason. Neither my mom nor Mira would talk like that if they didn't trust you to delve deeply enough to fully understand.

Chapter Nineteen

My mom's sessions with her friends got me put into a different category, one that fit me much better. It allowed my mom to understand me more deeply and me to speak more openly and honestly with her. So, after a few years, we became pretty good friends and were much closer than we had ever been before. By the time Heidi and I moved into 15 Circle Road, I felt very strongly that she was my mom and that she needed me to help her. It has occurred to me that for years she had been setting me up to care for her when she got too old to look after herself, but I doubt that was the case, and even if it were, I don't care.

My mom's transformation is a good example of how malleable a human being can be. It also illustrates the contrasting forces of group shallowness and depth. In one sense, the groups she had been a member of for most of her life held her in shallow allegiances. They took up most of her time, but never touched her all that deeply. Church committees, flower shows, the Woman's Club, and lunches with her friends had occupied her time, and more than somewhat removed her from her own family, but they had never

deeply engaged her. After spending time with her friends in their sessions, though, she began to see her own uniqueness. And as she appreciated the significance of her own being, she also came to appreciate mine.

Heidi once said of one of my relatives, "She seems like someone that no one else is deeply interested in." That was also exactly how my mom had been for years until the sessions with her friends changed everything. Since others had shown an interest in her, she was now able to show an interest in others. I think I may have been one of the biggest beneficiaries of her transformation besides herself. None of my siblings has said upon my questioning them that she had conversations with them in the last twenty years of her life like the ones she had with me. I guess I really had been the prodigal son and she wanted to get things right with me as she got older, or at least more right.

As for Heidi's comment that "she seems like someone that no one else is deeply interested in," you could say that about everyone in my family. And in many ways, I think, you could say that about almost everyone in the world because almost all human beings communicate with each other through static bundles of meaning, static signs, symbols, roles, static ideals and semiotics.

My mom's crying on the stairs in the front hall took on new significance. In a deep sense, she was right—nobody *did* love her. How could they if they had no way to know her?

When I was in sixth or seventh grade my mom took me to one of her friends houses about once a week for a few months. At the time, I had thought she just wanted to spend an hour or so with her friend, but her real motive had been for me to meet her friend's daughter. I think she thought that it would be good for me to meet some other people, and particularly a girl my own age.

My mom and her friend, Sue, always sat in the kitchen drinking tea while Joey, the daughter, and I ran all over the house having a wonderful time. Both of us were pretty much pre-sexual—I was a very late-bloomer, as was she—so both of us were able to cavort with an innocence and abandon I had only experienced with a few boyhood friends. We played games and laughed like maniacs. The minute we walked in the kitchen door, Joey would be in the hall leading to the rest of the house looking toward us and waiting for me to break away from our moms so we could sprint out of the room to start our fun.

Joey was full of energy, and since it was her home, I generally followed her around. She normally decided what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. I bet she thought about my visits between times and carefully planned how we were going to entertain ourselves. She was being a perfect hostess as she understood her role at the age of about eleven or twelve. Things went well enough for a couple of months. But then Joey started calling me "beady-eyes," which bothered my mom and led her to pay closer attention to how we were behaving.

"She kept calling you that name and leading you around everywhere and I just thought it wasn't very good for you, so I stopped going over there," my mom said.

"We had so much fun playing and I didn't care about that name. It was nothing," I said. I recalled missing Joey very much. First she was suddenly there. Then she suddenly was not.

"It wasn't just the name. She was always leading you around and I thought that you should be more in control." She paused and continued, "Now, I can see that it was harmless and you needed to experience that. You had to get used to girls who were not your sisters…"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I think your sisters became too dominant over you, particularly Mira. Just think of how many things you have done with Mira and how many ideas you two share. I saw that happening back then and did not want you be so much under her influence."

So she had thought about my development.

"Why didn't you just say something to me? Why didn't you try explaining that to me? I could have understood, at least much of it."

"I don't know, Tommy. I just didn't think that way."

"It's so sad to remember that now," I said. "Joey and I had a total blast fooling around and she did not always lead me around. We both were higher than kites most of the time. That was the last time I ever felt like that with anyone. It was sort of the end of my childhood."

"I know," my mom said. Then she looked directly at me while remaining silent. "I hate to tell you this, Tommy. I hate myself for this… but Sue called me up many times after we stopped going over there. She said that Joey was completely heart-broken and missed you too much. She said to me many times, 'Julia, *please* you can't do this to her. It is destroying her.' But I wouldn't listen…" My mom looked so ashamed and remorseful.

"Didn't you see her in school?" she asked tenderly.

"No, I never saw her again."

"Oh," my mom said. "She was so shy… You never saw her again?"

"No, I never did."

"I feel terrible about that. Neither of you ever got over it. I didn't realize… I thought you would see her in school."

I s*till* miss Joey. Those were some of the most fun-filled hours in my whole life.

As my mom and I sat there, we both felt sad about how life can turn on a dime like that. Four people had been pained, and at least two of us still were, by my mom's error in judgment, which I found entirely forgivable.

That incident, and others, showed that my mom had had some sense of her children's emotional development. She had just not had a complex sense of it. In her mind, it had been her responsibility to look down from on high and decide what needed to be done for us. For some reason, it never occurred to her to speak to me about any of it. She never consulted me on anything about my life or solicited my opinion on anything. I went to prep school because "your father and I have decided…" I stayed in a boy scout troop I didn't like "because you can't just quit now…" even though I had not liked it for years. I caddied at the golf club because "you need to have a summer job…" and that is going to be it. I was not allowed to apply to the University of California, the only school I really wanted to go to because "your sister went there and I don't think you should both go to the same school…"

I can remember her saying that with a resolute toss of her head, if there can be such a thing, when I was seventeen and had started thinking about where to go to college.

"So what? Who cares if she went there?"

"It's not a good idea for both of you to go to the same school." When I was a teen that sort of "reasoning" was quite common coming from her. The matter had been decided and our rational faculties would no longer be consulted.

I knew there was no arguing against that head toss and complete absence of accessible thought. In this light, it may be more understandable why I blew up when she left me waiting at the gas station outside the golf course—the cuss words had been generated silently in my mind on many occasions before that afternoon.

When she was old and we discussed these things, though, I did not feel mad at her anymore. She had been stupid, wrong, idiotic in some ways, but who hasn't been? Her version of human stupidity was particularly maddening, it's true, but it was fundamentally a simple mistake—she just did not realize or had never learned that she could talk as an equal, or near-equal, with me even when I was a child. And she did not realize or had never learned that she, the mom, could learn from me, her kid, even when I was very young.

In her late seventies, she learned it, and within a few visits our relationship changed completely. There is a Buddhist idea that fits pretty well here—even eons of karma can be overcome by a single thought. The moment my mom realized that she could speak directly to me and that I would answer reasonably and with understanding, our "bad karma" was gone and a new basis for our relationship began.

As I write this, I realize how much my mom said to me in the last fifteen to twenty years of her life. During that period and even after Heidi and I moved into 15 Circle Road, I had memories of our conversations and I referred to them in my mind and out loud to Heidi, but the entirety of them never fully hit me until now. Now, as I write this, I realize that my mom was saying all those things not just to apologize or set the record straight, or to assuage her feelings of guilt, but rather she said all that *to speak the truth*. She had become old and had come to feel that she needed or wanted *to speak the truth*. She chose me to be one of her listeners, I suppose, because she believed she had messed up my upbringing but also because she could see that I understood and responded in kind and that I would remember what she was saying. She could see, I imagine, that I too cared about the truth. That I too wanted to hear it and speak it. Furthermore, I was her son and she had large truths to share with me. And share she did. As I write this now, I realize that our going back to 15 Circle Road happened because of those conversations—because of the truth-telling my mom and I had shared.

Chapter Twenty

When I was in Junior High, I was invited to a girl's birthday party. I told my mom about it and she asked me what I was going to get for her as a present. I said, awkwardly, that I didn't know and that I thought birthday presents weren't required.

"I don't think it's that kind of party," I said.

"Of course it is," she replied. "When people have birthday parties that's an important part. You have to bring a present, Tommy! Who is the girl?"

"Gigi Gurren," I said.

My mom seemed quite pleased about that. I doubt she knew anything about Gigi, but was delighted that I had given her any information at all.

"We can go to the store right now," she said.

"Mom," I protested, waffled—I was torn between wanting to do the right thing and acute feelings of potential embarrassment if no one else brought a present to Gigi's party. We were at that age where we weren't kids who went to birthdays with cakes and presents anymore, but we also were not yet adults, who did much the same thing. Actually, I had no idea what was required or expected of me and I was not sure I could believe my mom.

Anyway, after a few more exchanges back and forth, we set out to the store to look for presents. I can't say as I did much but tag along, feeling proud that we were going to get a good present for Gigi, while at the same time worrying that I would feel mortified with shame when the day came if no one else had brought anything. I honestly do not know how other people figure stuff like that out. I guess I should have called one of the other guests and asked what they were going to bring, but I didn't think of that. It's probably hard for young readers today to understand how restricted phone use could be in those days. Though some of my friends had their own phone lines, I was hardly able to use any phone in our house for personal conversations because someone would probably listen in or bug me while I was talking.

Eventually we found a pair of pajamas that my mom thought would be perfect. I thought they were good too, but again had mixed feelings—was it right for me to give Gigi pajamas? But if not that, what? By this time, I was so confused, I just said yes, let's get those.

When the day of the party came, my mom drove me to Gigi's house in the afternoon. I felt the same mix of embarrassment and pleasure as I carried my present across the street and went to the back of Gigi's house to a door leading to a room downstairs. In the style of my parents—who were always early to everything—I was one of the first kids to arrive. I slunk in and put Gigi's present on a central table, then stepped away. As more kids came in, I observed that no one else was bringing Gigi a present. My worst fears were being realized. I am sure I must have blushed many hues of red as I stood on the edge of the room trying to figure out what to do. At one point, something happened in one corner of the room and everyone's attention was distracted. I moved quickly toward the table and pulled the card I had written off the present. I knew I couldn't get away with the whole box and I prayed that no one had seen me bring it in.

The party went on and eventually Gigi noticed the present. I experienced enormous relief when I realized that no one remembered seeing me with it. Kids looked at each other and asked, was it you? No one said yes, but no one knew it was me. I think Gigi suspected me but could not be sure. She may have also noticed my embarrassment and not questioned me further. I do not remember if what I am going to describe next actually happened or if it is a false memory that my mind has added to complete the event. Gigi opened the box and laughed with pleasure and surprise. A bunch of her girlfriends—friends of mine as well—leaned in to look closely at the pajamas. Gigi held them up and several people giggled or laughed in ways I knew not how to interpret. I was still mainly concerned with not being found out and relieved to see that I was probably in the clear.

When I got home, my mom asked me, "How did Gigi like her present?"

"She liked it," I answered, trying to get beyond the subject as quickly as I could.

"What did she say," my mom asked as a follow-up question.

"Mom, I don't know. There were a lot of people there. It happened quickly."

In her later years, she never referred to this incident, but I wish I had brought it up. She had done something very nice and had tried to share a part of my life with me, but this time it was me who wasn't able to reciprocate. I had no idea how to talk about girls with either of my parents. As I grew older, I kept falling for one after another of them, but never knew in any way how to actually approach them.

Gigi's party was a good example of that, but there were many more occasions when I dropped the ball or didn't pick it up when I should have. I am very sorry if I caused anyone any trouble in those days, as I am sure I did. I was a confused and excitable mess of a person before Mountebank and a confused and excitable mess of person after her, but more solemn and even less able to understand what was expected of me or how I felt about anything.

My mom also insisted that I go to dancing classes, which were held in the gym at Edgemere School, my old elementary school. I was in Junior High at the time and joined a class that included many of my friends and one girl—Paula Palvin—who drove me completely insane with feelings I could not even begin to understand. Whenever I got anywhere near her, I melted into a column of honey and was struck silent with mystical emotions.

The teacher was one "Mrs. Shallotte," who displayed an easy-going, old-world style of confidence and grace, which I think we were supposed to learn. She held her chin high and spoke, with a slight accent, in complete sentences with great self-assurance. She had been born and raised somewhere in Europe and was thus considered a model of proper comportment.

One day, she told the class as she moved her heavy frame gracefully in front of us—we were all seated on folding chairs on either side of the gym dance floor—that today the girls were going to ask the boys for a dance. The girls all started giggling with embarrassment as they exchanged glances with each other and with us. They were sitting on one side of the gym while all the boys were on the other.

Mrs. Shallotte said that it was important for both girls and boys to understand both sides of an invitation to dance. "This is an important aspect of developing good manners," she said.

Immediately, I understood that I would feel terrible if no one asked me to dance. I also knew that I might die as if a sword had been run through my chest if Paula asked me to dance.

"Now, pay attention to your feelings and to your *manners*," Mrs. Shallotte continued. "We will only do this once or twice in this class, but it is an important lesson for all of you, girls and boys alike."

The girls giggled harder, while the boys, if any of them shared my feelings, were on the verge of passing out. We had danced with the girls before, but it had always been part of a general routine. This was completely new.

"Now, girls, please stand and move gracefully to ask your partners to dance."

My greatest desire and worst fear were soon realized. Paula stood and walked straight to where I was sitting. I prepared myself for her to turn to one of my friends on either side, but she did not.

"Tommy, would you like to dance with me?"

During the next three minutes I experienced some of the strongest, and vaguest, feelings I had ever known. There was no place in my pathetic excuse for a personality to organize them or comprehend them. Like the song, all I wanted at that point was to "dance all night." Three minutes was all I got, but I can still remember much of how I felt now, almost fifty years later. I think a big part of heaven would be

going back to moments in your life like that and reliving them in full communication with the person involved. And I don't mean consummating those moments with sex. I just mean reliving them with full awareness with the person who was involved.

My mom sent me to that dance school because she loved ballroom dancing and thought everyone should know how to do it. She and my father often went to dances and my mom was always excited to go.

During one of our conversations in her later years, she said to me, "But you never go dancing yourself. None of you who took those classes likes to dance."

Apparently she had checked with some of the other mothers, or heard from them somehow.

"No, I suppose that's true. I don't like dancing very much at all."

"Why not?" my mom said, greatly disappointed. "That was the whole point… to get you to enjoy dancing."

"Well, few people dance that way any more. And I suppose, it seems sort of childish to us now. It was something we did as kids and don't really want to do anymore."

"I wonder if Mrs. Shallotte didn't quite understand your ages… your needs at that age."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Some of the women have said that she was pushing into feelings you weren't ready for."

"Me?"

"No, all of you. Either she didn't understand or she was getting some kind of strange pleasure from making you all feel awkward."

"Gee, I don't know," I said. "I never thought of it that way."

"What do you think now?"

"That may be a good point. Maybe it was too much, too soon. Those girls had been friends of ours or we had known them for years, but suddenly we were required to touch them in ways that didn't feel natural. It's probably best to let those feelings develop on their own."

"All I wanted was for you to enjoy dancing," she said again ruefully.

It was another example of how my mom was not so good at motivating me. She rarely said anything in a way that would get me going but instead put me in situations like the dancing class or caddying or boy scouts that were supposed to do the talking for her.

I can well remember my mom getting dolled up before going out to some dance.

I can even remember the first time she went out in the evening when I was very small and we were still living on Lee Road.

She was far more dressed-up than I had ever seen her before and liberally doused with perfume. The odor smelled unnatural to me and seemed to be uncovering a side of my mom that I had not even known existed. My parents spent a good length of time hovering near the front door, assuring me that they would be back soon and that I was to go to bed when the baby-sitter, a striking black woman, said to. I stood on the stairs and watched them close the door. It felt strange to see them both go out and leave me alone with the baby-sitter. I don't know where my sisters were and my brother had not yet been born.

I don't know if it was that night or a different one, but that same baby-sitter used to give me baths and let me play with her breasts, which she exposed while kneeling at the side of the tub. She would laugh as I touched them and encourage me to kiss them. "This way, you always gonna love black people," she said.

That would not be what I would want anyone to do with a small kid, but I don't think it was that bad for her to do that. I enjoyed it and do not think it caused me any harm. Now that I think of it, those incidents may be the reason I imagined Mrs. Gold unbuttoning her blouse in class.

There was also another black woman who baby sat for us sometimes. This second one, and I remember neither of their names, is someone who I remember as being mean. She scowled and probably resented the hell out of her situation, especially since my parents just assumed that she would be grateful for the work. Years later, the mysterious stranger told me that there was reasonable suspicion that she had given me a "voodoo disease," which was diagnosed as encephalitis when I was four. I have a memory of that woman rubbing something into my nose, but I cannot be sure it's a real memory. I may have made it up to fit the story I heard.

After we moved to Circle Road, I remember many scenes of my mom and dad getting ready to go to a dance. My mom always wore thick red lipstick and doused herself with perfume. Her mood was always jovial and it was easy to see that she was looking forward to having a good time. One night, she wore a gold silk, Chinese-style dress that was fairly tight. I remember watching her squeeze into it and looking at herself in the full-length mirror in her dressing room.

"Maybe it's too tight," she said, half asking my opinion and half talking to herself.

It did look tight to me but not too tight. "I don't know," I said.

She said, "I'm going to wear it anyway," with a look of determination.

The next day I asked her how the dress had been. "Oh," she said sadly. "I ruined it."

"You ruined it? What happened?"

"It's made of silk and I did not wear the right garment under it, so I perspired and stained it."

"You did? Can I see it?"

She took me upstairs to show me the dress. "You see? It's ruined," she said as she lay the dress across her hand. "See these stains? They're not very large, but you can't get them out so I won't be able to wear this dress again."

Her perfume, the stained dress, and the detritus of many cocktail parties on the first floor of 15 Circle Road caused me to see in her world something of what Japanese artists have seen in the "floating world" of *ukioye* wood block prints. My mom was not a prostitute, of course, and the floating world she and my father participated in was not Edo with geishas and poetry and booze, but it was a floating world nevertheless—a transitory one, as they all are—of brief pleasures, brief alliances, brief feelings that though they come and go leave indelible impressions on the mind.

On some mornings after one of her cocktail or dinner parties at Circle Road, I would go down to the living room early, before my parents got up, to search for half-finished drinks or forgotten cigarettes. I'd pick up whatever I found, and if it was good, share it with my friend later in the day. The early morning scene with many dirty glasses and filled ashtrays contrasted in my mind with the gay sounds and smells of the night before. Loud laughter, perfume, and cigarette smoke would fill the house while lights shone brightly. I could always pick out the sound of my mom's shoes as she moved from the carpeted hall to the kitchen, which was covered with linoleum. Her heels would strike with a speed and self-assurance that none of her guests could match. Except for one or two occasions, I never went downstairs when my parents had people over. I always stayed upstairs reading and half-listening to the sounds of so many people gathered below.

People have said that it was bad of my parents not to introduce me to their friends, not to let me get used to being around people, and I see the point in their saying that. But it was also a good experience to lie in my room alone reading a book, hearing all those voices as they floated from room to room and up the stairs to my ears. Out my window on the third-floor was a giant oak tree that stood sentinel over many of my experiences. Just months before my mom died, the old oak was cut down because a suspicious fungus had started growing around its base. I had called the village about it and their arborist decided it was a potential danger. If it fell in one of the many severe storms we were then having, it could have caused serious damage. Once it was cut down we could see that the fungus had done nothing to undermine the tree. I felt sad about that, but it would not have been wise to take a chance on it. Mira counted the tree rings and discovered that the old oak had probably started growing during or just after the American Revolution. The uncertainty is due to no one bothering to do a recount. Heidi saved some of the small trees that sprout every year from its acorns and distributed them to anyone who would have them. As the tree was being taken down, my mom, who was then confined to her bedroom, could see the activity and sometimes hear the chain saws just beyond her window.

"What's that?" she asked in wonder as the branches shook.

"The old oak in front of the house is being taken down," I said.

"Oh," she said. "Why?"

"It has a fungus around its base and we are afraid it might fall."

"Look at that," she said in wonder as another branch shook and came down. Its shivering leaves reflected light and color in a way that fascinated my mom. I am going to guess that in this case the real world was imitating her hallucinations. As the branch disappeared from sight, an empty expanse of sky that had never been there before in our memory appeared.

"Wow," my mom said with feeling. "Look at that."

Then she shrugged and smiled at me. *What can you do?* her expression said. The old tree had to come down and there was no putting it back now.

Chapter Twenty-one

My mom, dad, and whole family are a near perfect example of a dying culture, a dying breed, or if you prefer, the passing of time. My parents had some sense of their European background, but my siblings have almost none and I have what little I have mainly out of loyalty to my father and grandmother. Beyond a few abstractions, I know next to nothing about the old world or what it was like and nothing about the languages.

I know I don't belong there and doubt I would be welcome or understood by anyone if I went.

The myths and emotions of ancient Baltic culture have all but died in us. We are estranged from it, supported now by English legal and political abstractions, which I deeply admire. At times, I have tried to work up feelings for the old world and the landscape my forebears lived in, but the feelings are not deep and not supported by anyone else around me.

There are other types of people in this world, of course, ones who believe they do belong somewhere. All around me in Scarsvale were people of this type—Italian-Americans, Irish-Americans, Jewish-Americans, American-Americans from the Deep South, and others. Each in their own way believed and was impassioned by cultural fictions about their greatness, uniqueness, special place in history, and how other groups had not treated them well.

I do confess that it is lonely to be a dying breed. It is disheartening to see around you the fictions of other groups dominating a world that no longer has a place for you. But there are compensations—something approaching the truth becomes clearer in your mind. You can really see that the myths of human groups are myths, fictions, pleasant lies with which they deceive themselves. You can see this especially well whenever you try to work up some myths of your own because there is so little support for them. You need many millions of people to buy the stories, to learn them and repeat them. You can't make them up out of whole cloth yourself and go walking around outside and take yourself seriously. No, you know full-well that culture is a form of conscious and subconscious self-deception. A Jewish friend who claimed such satisfaction at being descended from the Temple of Solomon was unable to tell me where his family had been for the past three hundred years. He didn't know his own past except as a myth. Irish friends were weighed down by "the troubles," while English ones were inflated by that "something special" about English society.

Say what I may, I must also admit that they have survived, while we have not. Those people have stories that I can't tell because our story is gone. My father knew that his father's family had lived in the same area southwest of Vilnius for several centuries, that they had moved there, or become self-aware, in the eighteenth century. He knew that his father's father had been a horse trader and that his father had come to America to make money so he could go back home and buy some land. WWI and newborns had intervened and he never went back. My father's mother's father had been a circuit judge and a Yiddish interpreter in the same region southwest of Vilnius.

But I was never told any of this until I was in my teens. There is no one to blame. It's life, history. Groups come and go. Native Americans are in much the same position, though they pine away on roughly the same land, watching in horror as people like me stalk their hills and fields.

As I have aged, this nation of abstract principles that fully held my allegiance and attention when I was young has turned into a "proposition nation," a place that those with the most power and media presence define as they please. The multiculturalism that exists all around me now reminds me daily that I have no culture even as I must respect the myths of others. All is not lost, though. Having been

shorn of my own culture, having become a waif on the world's stage, having no place to call my own, I am also free. I can describe myself and I can describe Heidi and she can describe herself and me because nothing defines either of us.

Some of my favorite artists, a small section from a very long list, are Nikolai Gogol, Edvard Munch, Vincent Van Gogh, and Samuel Becket. I have always believed that a real artist tells the truth, and these guys did that to the best of their ability. Gogol wrote *Dead Souls* with the intention that that near-perfect volume would be the first of three. It was designed to describe the problem, while the next two would describe how to fix the problem. Of course, he never wrote the next two because he was never able to figure out how to fix the problem. It is my guess that Munch, Van Gogh, and Becket also set out to describe the problem. If I can state it clearly enough, they must have thought, I will be able to see what it is, where it comes from, how to change it. Like Archimedes, they must have thought "give me a place to stand and I will move the world." They all did move the world, but not far enough. Like Gogol, they never found a place to stand. All that remains of them now, in so many minds, is the price their paintings sell for, or their old watches or manuscripts. The individual who cares—artist or not—is reduced in modern society to a thumbnail of themselves, to an artifact of history even before they are dead. Most of us, of course, are forgotten.

Some of us are taken to be dead even before we enter the grave.

One day when I was about nine. I was up in my room reading. It was summer or late spring. I heard my father come home early in mid-afternoon and then my mom calling me to come downstairs. Her voice was rich with concern. I came down the stairs and my parents did something very unusual for them—they asked me to sit in the living room with them. I took a seat on one of the couches. My father sat next to me, half-facing me, while my mom sat on another couch that was placed at ninety degrees to the one I was on.

"Tommy," my mom said, "there is something written on the street. Do you know what it is?"

I had no idea and said so.

My mom said to my father, "He has been upstairs for the whole afternoon."

Neither my father nor my mother looked relieved. At that point, I knew this was not about me.

My father stared heavily at my mother and then turned to me and asked, "Do you know what a Nazi sign is?"

I said I did. He said there was one drawn on the street in front of our house. "Do you know who put it there?"

I said I did not but that it was probably one of the kids in the neighborhood. My parents still did not look relieved.

"That is a very serious thing to do," my father said. He seemed as worried as I had ever seen him. "I don't think it is one of the kids around here."

I asked why not and he replied that "it doesn't look like the work of a child."

I said I was going to go out and have a look, but my parents stopped me from going. "It's better you stay right here," my father said. "We will take care of it."

I don't know what happened after that, but at some point my father went out and removed the sign. I seem to remember that it had been done with chalk and that he used a garden hose, but I can't be completely sure of that.

I have wondered about that incident many times since. I realize now that that incident was the first time I became aware, dimly, that there was more to my life than met the eye.

It occurred around the time that Citron was doing his thing with Kelly and me. Were those events connected? A few years later, I met my fate with Mountebank and Rathbone and a year or so after that a friend and I were deliberately almost run down by a speeding car on Crane Road that swerved not to avoid us but to hit us.

That sign in the street also occurred at around the time that my father became distant and moody and my mom started having her emotional breakdowns.

To this day, I still wonder if my family had gotten on some secret list that had made us the targets of sadists, child molesters, extremists. Had we gotten caught up in MKULTRA or one of its clones conducted by a secret society?

As a grown man now I know that the world I thought existed when I was a kid never existed and that there is far more evil and cruelty in life than I could possibly have comprehended at that age, and for years beyond.

It is hard for me to tell this tale from this point on. But if I don't tell it I will feel terrible. If I do tell it, I will feel ashamed for reasons that are not clear to me to this day. Many things in life never make sense—unexpected events, sings in the street, emotions. Even after years of thinking about them, they still make little or no sense.

I can't fix that but I can say what I think I know and what I believe.

One curious aspect of that day is why were my parents so concerned about the sign in the street? The sign alone could not have been that big of a deal. Why did my father act graver than I had ever seen him before? And why did my mom appear so dumbfounded?

Had they received a phone call about the sign? Was it a threatening phone call? What more did they know about it? Had my mom called my father and asked him to come home early that day because of what was in the street? It was very unusual for him to be home at that hour.

There is much that I do not know. And yet, I do know that many things changed after that sign appeared. My father withdrew almost completely from my life, while as the years and decades went by I experienced one bad thing after another. While I was in Wosta, Madison, New Hampshire, California, bad luck and trouble followed me wherever I went.

Chapter Twenty-two

The mysterious stranger told me that "their suspicion" was that I really had been put on some secret list, and that probably my whole family had.

"What we can't figure out," he said, "is why."

"You have no idea?" I asked.

"Our best guess is you were payback for an Irish debt. Kelly really is Irish-American and someone thought you were, too. You have the name."

"Who would do that?"

"You are an example of what we have to teach Irish kids—that if you go off on your own, you have no protection.

"There are people who hate our guts for fights that happened way before you were born," he continued. "Those people don't give a fuck what *you* did or didn't do. It's payback for some shit from years ago. That's our best guess, but we aren't sure."

I was stunned. In the first place, I was stunned that he even knew about that sign in the road from over thirty years before and in the second place I was stunned because what he said made sense to me. It fit very well with what I had experienced.

I have to add a short aside here. I have referred to the mysterious stranger a few times in this book and I will have much more to say about him. Everything in this book is true to the best of my knowledge and memory. I have changed most people's names to avoid causing them any problems. But the stories are true. Those things happened to me and that is how I remember them. The mysterious stranger, however, is someone whose identity I must conceal more carefully than the others. Actually, the mysterious stranger is a composite of several people who spoke to me at different times after I became an adult. I cannot give away too much about those people because they, or the organizations they represent, provided me with valuable information that has helped me understand a great deal. I owe them. To conceal their identities, I have decided to somewhat fictionalize the places and circumstances under which I met them. I am also going to mix around some of the information they gave—who said what when and why. The overall impression I am going to give you about the mysterious strangers, though, will be true to the best of my understanding and memory. I have chosen to call them "mysterious strangers" in an attempt to further a tradition started by Mark Twain with his story, *The Mysterious Stranger,* and also because that is exactly how they seemed to me, appearing suddenly out of nowhere only to disappear again after leaving me with information that takes years to digest.

"But how do you even know all that?" I asked. "How could you have found out about that sign, or Kelly, or any of what you have been telling me?"

We were standing on an outdoor train platform in a small city in Japan.

"Do you remember when you were in Taiwan and you took the foreign service exam?"

"Yes," I said. *How the fuck did he know that?* I thought.

"Well, when you filled out your application, you signed your ass away to us. You didn't even read the small print, did you?"

"No, I didn't," I said. "I never did anything with that. I never pursued it at all after that exam."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "You thought you could just walk away from that like any other job, but you can't. Once you sign those papers, we can investigate your life for as long as we want and as much as we want."

Cool fall air blew across the tracks. A *soba* stand was in the distance. People were coming down the stairs to wait for the next train. I had no idea what to say.

"It's not so bad," the stranger said. "Our knowing about you has actually protected you. You are one seriously fucked-up guy but you have done very little wrong in your life and you are more honest than most people, by far.

"When you signed that application, you agreed to help your country. You haven't done anything directly, but our figuring out what has been happening to you has allowed us to understand a great deal. So, you have helped your country."

I have to say, I felt proud at that point. Who doesn't want to hear something like that? But the next thought that came to me was is he manipulating me? Using praise for a different end?

"Well, I am happy I did something good, even if I knew nothing about it," I said.

"What do you always tell your students about crime in America?"

I was teaching in Japan at the time.

"That it's not as bad as the press makes it look," I said.

"And…?" he asked. "Don't you also say that you have never been the victim of a crime, except once when your bicycle was stolen in college?"

He stunned me again. How did he know so much about me?

As if reading my face, or mind, he said with an almost derisive laugh, "I know more about you than *you* do. I kid you not."

He glared at me and then continued. His face was strong, creased with the lines of someone who takes life seriously.

"Look," he said, "you have been the victim of so many fucking crimes, we can't even count them all."

Again I was flabbergasted.

"You know something about sociology," he said. I nodded.

"In sociology, there are two basic types of research. One uses a lot of people to get a broad picture of a society. The other goes into great depth on a single person—that's you. What you find is that if one person has something happen to them many times, it is almost certainly a very widespread phenomenon throughout the entire society."

The stranger was taller and older than me and towered over me emotionally and intellectually because he did and because he knew more about me than I did. He seemed to relish his knowledge while also being disgusted by it. He spoke with a sneer when he addressed me next.

"You have been poisoned—given drugs—and assaulted in other ways so many times, we can only conclude that you are an example of a widespread social phenomenon."

I was stunned but held my silence. To him I was an example. I felt like an example.

"Remember that girl you met when you first went to Taiwan? The one who stole your traveler's checks?"

"Yes," I said. I had become friends with her and one day she gave me a tranquilizer and stole some money from me as I slept.

The mysterious stranger looked at me knowingly and described some other incidents that I would rather not detail because the person involved will be obvious and I have long forgiven her.

"And we think that you were also being poisoned at Wosta."

"What?" I said, physically recoiling for the first time. I had known about the incident in Taiwan and long suspected the other person. But I was taken aback when he mentioned Wosta. Wosta Academy seemed very far away from us in time and space as we stood on a train platform in Japan.

"Do you remember your friend, Fecenian? When you went to his house for the weekend?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you remember his grandmother gave you a special meal?"

I smiled at the memory. She had made some really special Armenian food for me and it had been delicious.

"Did she give any to your friend?"

"No," I said. "She said it was special and just for me." I was starting to get the idea and did remember the old lady stopping her grandson from sampling the food with a stern look in her eyes.

"Did your friend's mother eat any? Did the grandmother?"

"No," I said. *Holy shit*, I thought. *That fucking bitch was poisoning me.* The memories came flooding back. I remembered my friend's mom standing to the side and looking at me and the scene before her in a most peculiar way. My friend tried several times to get some of the food, reaching forward, but was stopped by his mother and grandmother each time. We were in a separate building from the main house, a small mother-in-law apartment in which the grandmother lived.

"What did you do after that?" the stranger asked.

"My friend and I went out to try to steal a stop sign."

"And what happened then?"

"We started climbing up the sign, but I suddenly didn't want to do it anymore."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I felt terrible and just wanted to go back to his house and lie down."

"Were you sick? Did you feel nauseous?"

"Not at all," I said. "I just felt very dark and gloomy and wanted to go lie down."

"That's it. We don't know what the fuck that stuff is, but the old lady did. They must have had it for centuries.

"What happened after that?"

"I don't remember anything else from that night," I said.

"What about the next day?"

"I remember my friend's mom, Mrs. Fecenian, talking to me. She said, 'Oh your poor mother. If she knew… how could she ever expect this? You came to my house and now…"

"What did you say to her?"

"I didn't understand what she was talking about."

"How did you feel?"

"I felt very gloomy and dark, like I was half-alive."

"Did she say anything else?"

"She said something about how she never should have let the old lady do that…"

"If that woman had really cared about you," he said, "she would have taken you to a hospital right then and there and had that old bitch arrested."

I was utterly stunned once again by his words. But I was also partly relieved. A mystery I had not even known existed had been revealed to me, and it explained so much.

"What about after you got back to school? Did you stay friends with Fecenian?"

"No, actually, something happened. He got mad at me…"

"And you don't know why, do you?"

"No idea."

"Did you have food in your room? Did you keep food there?" he asked.

"Sure, of course. We all did."

"Where?"

"I kept some candy bars in the top drawer of my dresser."

"That's it," he exclaimed. I realize now from his tone and expression that I was giving him a fact he had not known before. The rest of the story he must have pieced together from things I had told other people and from information he had somehow gotten from Mrs. Fecenian. I was amazed that his information was so accurate and that he even knew about the old lady and what Mrs. Fecenian had said to me on the next day.

"She tried to fix your jacket, too, didn't she?"

Yes," I said. I had ripped a small section in the back climbing over a fence at Wosta Academy to go to Grogan's Spa the week before going to her house. "She did fix it, sort of. She put an iron-on patch over the rip. It held for a long time after."

The mysterious stranger was glaring, obviously angry and disgusted. "That bitch," he said. I suppose the mixture of her small concern about my torn jacket set against her massive offense against my person made her seem like a despicable worm in his mind.

"That bitch," he repeated. "She had to know what her son was doing in school.

"We think that he was poisoning you. Him and some of his friends were giving you the same shit his fucked-up grandma had given you. Remember those headaches you got? And all those colds?"

"Yes," I replied. "But I always thought that was because of Mountebank."

"Goddamnit," he said. "Those fucking people. It's probably both. It's fucking insane. The whole fucking country is a fucking complete mess. We think that what happened to you happened to lots of people. You're not the only one."

"What's the point?"

"Like I said, some of it is payback. But there's more. Look, it's a brilliant plan in a way. What they are doing is targeting leaders—young people who have brains, looks, some talent. Natural leaders. Then they get you all fucked-up as they can. Just get you all fucked-up. It's much better than killing you because even afterward… you will remain a leader. But instead of following you someplace good, other people will follow you into shit.

"Look at you, you're a fucking mess. You are able to hold this teaching job in Japan, but you are functioning at a fraction of your potential. They started wiping you out when you were in grade school."

"Who?" I asked.

"Fucking bastards," he said. "Remember that Nazi sign outside your house when you were a kid?"

"Yes," I said, allowing my mind to shift to the rich drama that had hovered over that afternoon.

"Who do you think did it?"

"I always used to think that it was some kids in the neighborhood, but now I am not so sure…"

"We think it was a mark, a warning, a statement… There was nothing your parents could have done at that point. You were already completely fucked.

"You wanna know something else? President Clinton knows your fucking story. The fucking president of the United States knows about you."

He stared at me in derisive amazement, mistaking my incredulity for apathy.

"That's a fucking honor, I'm telling you. He sure as shit don't know my fucking name. You are one of the most studied people in the history of the world, can you believe that?"

"Honestly, no," I said.

"Who could? I don't blame you." He became more friendly again. "We know more about you than anyone who has ever lived.

"It's an honor," he continued, "I mean it." I think he said that partly to soften what was coming next.

"The thing is, the way we got the information is we have talked to almost everyone you ever knew. They tell us stuff, then we go to someone else and build on that. The only bad thing we did is we repeated bad shit you said or… we made shit up. I feel bad about that because none of those people is going to want to deal with you ever again. You ain't got no friends left except the ones you make going forward. I am sorry about that." He looked at me to gauge my reaction. I felt blank, even numb and had no idea how to react. It was more than I could absorb in such a short time.

"No wonder I'm so fucking paranoid," I said.

"Yeah, you oughta be."

"So what kinds of things did you say to them?" I asked.

"Like, we would do a fairly normal background interview for government work, but then after we had everything, we would bring up any shit you might have said about them, or we would just make something up. It's very predictable what people will do in that situation. It's almost always the same. Their eyes pop open and they sit back and say 'he said *that*?' If whatever it was has the ring of truth, they will pour out any shit they have on you. That's how we get most of our best info, but, you know, people are angry, so grain of salt.

"Your old girlfriend in college, though, she was pretty good. She held up. She gave us some shit, but nothing much. That's the kind of person we respect the most. They are given a real reason to hate you and they are in an unusual situation talking to skilled interviewers, but they hold up. They don't shit on you, or not much. You should respect her. Not many like that, I can tell you."

Chapter Twenty-three

I will say more about the mysterious stranger in a moment, but first I want to explain how what he was saying must have impacted my mom. It seems to me that a good deal of her somewhat stiff character, her restricted emotional structure, must have been due to events such as those described by the stranger. There may have been drugs even at 15 Circle Road and they may have affected everyone in my family, I don't know. But if an old lady in Wosta could poison me as her daughter looked on and if a man who claimed very plausibly to work for the US government suspected that I had been poisoned at Wosta and in other places, how could I not wonder if my mom had also been affected? Or the rest of my family?

Payback, revenge, sadism, a plot to take over the USA, then the world—how could I not wonder how that might have affected us? As I said about Gogol and the others, real artists tell the truth. I don't know what kind of artist I am but I can try to tell the truth. And there is no doubt in my mind that part of the reason I want to do that is my mom's change of heart that came in her late seventies. From that point on, she wanted to tell the truth, at least to me. It makes me feel now that there is some lineage of truth that flows through the world, showing itself and disappearing at different times and places. Why shouldn't my mom be the one who woke that up in me? I wonder if Gogol himself did not move her to converse with me the way she came to do. Living at home with her near the end of her life, I saw that her whole nature had turned toward the truth. She didn't have the literary or cultural associations I had. And she didn't have the same kinds of linguistic interests as me, but she did turn her spirit toward the truth in

her own way, and I was able to appreciate that. Our conversations in the Chinese restaurant and in her car paved the way for me to understand that I have to tell this story, that I cannot leave it alone, that I am not doing anything wrong by telling it, that it is true, and that it is not a lie.

I wonder now if my mom had been drawn into those sessions with her friends because of me. Was it possible that one or more of those women had learned details similar to the ones related to me by the mysterious stranger? And was it possible that they had felt morally obligated to help my mom understand that I was not entirely the misfit she thought I was? If so, I take my hat off to those ladies and hope I repaid the favor by treating my mom as well as I knew how during the last years of her life. It's a small world and Scarsvale is a very big small town. It is not implausible at all that my mom's friends knew far more about her, and me, than they ever let on.

Was the mysterious stranger lying? Was he setting me up for something else? Was he using advanced psychological techniques to get me to do something? To turn me away from people who wanted to help me, who were on my side?

I wondered all of this as he spoke to me that day on the platform of the Japanese train station. As I surely appeared more and more stunned by his intricate and amazingly well-informed descriptions of my past, the stranger suggested we take a seat. There was an empty bench beside a tall chain-link fence a short distance from the wooden *soba* stand, whose steam continually wafted under and around the short blue banners that hung from its low eaves. Behind the fence was a small street leading to a small city center. As we took our seats, I wondered how had the stranger even known that I would be at that station at that time?

I am mindful that some readers may be concluding that I was suffering a schizophrenic break-down. Rather than try to argue that point, I will simply say that a great deal of the information I am giving is known to others and they have confirmed it with me. It has been corroborated from several different angles. A casual reader who knows nothing about me may be unwilling to accept that, but what information can I give that they will accept? If you want to take this story as the story of a schizophrenic who still is unable to separate the real from the delusional, that will be fine with me. It's still a good story, though that ain't the case.

As the stranger began to speak again, I had the overwhelming sense that virtually all of my life had been a lie, an illusion. Had I understood anything I saw in China? In Japan? How much of Japan do Japanese themselves comprehend? What did I really know about America? Here I was an American who had believed in a life that had never existed. Were my parents any different? Are you? What does any of us really know for certain?

As I suffered this angst, the stranger held my attention by describing things that I knew I remembered. Things that only people who had been there could have described. His story was far too detailed to be made-up.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. We don't want anything… Except some of us want to explain… some of us knew you back when you were kids. You know Joseph Conrad, right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Lord Jim?"

"Yes," I said.

"Remember what Conrad said about Jim? That he had *ability* and, more importantly, that 'he was one of us.' They think you are one of them. They think you should know."

My mind raced trying to figure out who those people could be. Kelly? Jim? Classmates from school or members of my boy scout troop? Were any of the girls I had been in love with during grade school involved?

"Jury of your peers. Remember you have said stuff like 'how can I ever get a jury of my peers?' It's true you can't because few people would ever understand what has happened to you, or why."

"Even I don't understand," I said. "Why? What is the reason? It makes no sense to me. Payback for some Irish fight that happened before I was born? Are you saying whoever is behind this didn't even bother to find out something as simple as that? That I am not Irish?"

"It looks that way. We have tried to figure out if there was a Lithuanian connection, especially since you had trouble in Wosta, too, but we couldn't find anything. Your grandparents were not big players in their community in Wosta. In fact, they were kind of on the edge of it, especially your father's people, but no one had any shit on them. They never did anything. Remember where they lived?"

I did.

"That was the edge of that community. They were out on the edge physically and psychologically. Not big players. Kind of like you…"

"Was that the main factor?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But we do know that it's not only us following you around. There are other groups. And one of them is using you as part of a huge psychological study. I hate to say it, Tom, but you are basically a fucking lab rat."

The worst part of what he was saying is it made sense. Over the years I had become increasingly wary of people because so many of them seemed to harbor ulterior motives. They felt like veneers over dark secrets. I would go through the motions of being friends only to find enigmatic stoppages in their minds. There were truths, but never deep truths. At some level I could tell that people were pumping me for information—trying to hear my opinions—rather than actually conversing with me.

"Even your fucking sister was involved in that shit, but that's another story for later… You remember some of your friends in college? The guy who used to hang out with you and your friend George?"

"There were a few of those," I replied, filled with a sense of foreboding.

"Chip. Remember him?"

"Chip," I smiled. "Sure, we used to hang out all the time."

"If you knew what he was up to, you wouldn't be smiling now." He looked at me grimly. "He was pretending to be your friend but he was putting shit in your food, too."

A memory came to me. One day after class, I went back to my apartment, which I shared with George. George was there and no one else. He asked me, "Did you see Chip on your way here?"

I said, "No, I didn't."

"The strangest thing just happened." George looked very serious and deeply perplexed. "When I came in, I heard someone in the bathroom. I thought it was you. I guess I was being pretty quiet. Anyway, when I came around the corner, I could see Chip in the bathroom…"

I was waiting for some lurid description, but all George said was, "He was dumping out the dinner you cooked last night. He was scooping it into the toilet and flushing it. I stood and watched him. He didn't see me for some time."

"Oh, that's OK," I said blithely. "He probably tried to fix it up and didn't like the result…"

"No, I don't think so," George replied. "For one thing, how did he get in here? The door was locked when I came back."

"I don't know," I said.

George continued, "I think he may have come up the back stairs and gotten in that way." There was an old, unused stairway on the back side of the building. I still wasn't getting it.

"I doubt that," I said. "We must have left the door unlocked."

"I don't think so," George continued, maintaining his serious manner. "I made a noise and when he turned to look at me, he looked afraid… maybe, not afraid, but not the way he usually looks. He looked kind of scared."

"Maybe he was embarrassed," I offered. I had zero sense of alarm because I could see no way at all that Chip could have been doing anything wrong. I was mildly disappointed that the Chinese stew I had made was gone, but it didn't seem like a big deal. I even felt slightly flattered that Chip had wanted to try my cooking.

"I don't know," George continued. "It's very strange. I don't know what to make of it. He seemed weird, like another person."

I stared at the stranger, cognizant for the first time that Chip may have been something other than a college friend. He asked me to tell him the story I just told above about what George had seen. I told him and he said, "We think that's when he decided to reform. He claims he is very sorry for what he did, ashamed of himself. He said you used to always be concerned about his crappy diet. He ate tuna fish every day, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, I guess that got to him. You were trying to get him to eat good food while he was fucking with yours.

"He told us that he had been led into what he was doing by some older guys. They told him that you were a really bad character—'one of the worst'—and that what he was doing was the only way to deal with people like you. He really cussed those guys out. He told us, 'They were teaching me to do something I never should have done. I never should have believed them.'"

The stranger continued, "He really does regret it. He's living a very simple life now. He says that he's a victim of 'those bastards' just as much as you, and he's sort of right."

Even I agreed. I was beginning to see the fullness of what the stranger had been saying. Chip had been an important friend for several years. How could it have helped him to deceive me and harm me like that?

"How much of this stuff do you have?" I asked, afraid to hear his answer.

"Tons. Like I said, we know more about you than you know about yourself. It's so fucked-up, I can't believe it. No one would believe it. You see… that's how it works. It's so fucked-up no one can believe it. But you have to have some respect—it's a devilish plan, a psychopathic wet-dream, and it has worked pretty fucking well. Rather than actually do anything useful, you, and we don't know how many more, are wandering around leading people your age deeper and deeper into shit. I'm sorry. It's not your fault, but it's a fucking tragedy. You ever see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you think you should be killed like McMurphy?"

"What?" I was beyond taken aback.

"Because you are so fucked-up. Some guys say you should just be killed, like the Indian killed McMurphy. Put you out of your misery."

I couldn't believe my ears. I was a bit of a black sheep and not the world's most productive or socially active person, but killed because I was like McMurphy, who'd had a double-lobotomy?

"Are you serious?" I asked, starting to feel depressed.

"See, you want to live, too. Look, you are one of us. No one is going to kill you, but can you see the thinking there? That's how fucked-up it is."

"Why can't you control them?"

"We reigned it in, but it's worse than you realize. We don't have enough people. Not enough good people. There's work to be done, I guarantee it, but we don't have the people. Can you do it? What the fuck do you know? You know Chinese and you wrote a pretty good novel, big fucking deal. We are talking world history here, not fucking literature. Seriously, you want to help?"

"How?"

"That's the thing, you don't have the training and if we try to give it to you, you won't listen. You're too fucked-up. You'll just fight us and cause more problems. You're worse than a dead soldier. Though, like I said, a lot of guys do thank you because we never would have figured the whole thing out—at least not so soon—if it weren't for you. Too many people know you, know your background, so they can relate to what has happened. Some of them even wonder if shit hasn't happened to them, too. In fact, a lot of guys wonder that. Did you ever suspect anything?"

"Not once," I said.

"See how fucked-up it is? They tell us they were 'teaching you a lesson,' but what the fuck kind of lesson is that if you don't even know anything about it?"

"Teaching a ten-year-old kid a lesson. You can't be serious."

"That's what I mean. It's just completely fucked-up. I don't even see how we can survive. It is so easy to fuck with someone without anyone else knowing what is happening. It's a huge group of psychopaths…"

He stared into the distance. As I looked toward his pock-marked profile, I found a new appreciation for his sarcastic manner. What had happened had happened to me and not him, but he knew or glimpsed the greater extent of it. Maybe thousands had been targeted, maybe many thousands.

"You want to know something we found out about Fecenian's grandma?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"I can't tell you how we found this out, but Fecinian's mom took care of her before she died and she said that the old lady was terrified of dying during her last months. I mean she was in a panic over it… kind of like she could see where she was going."

I didn't know what to think or how to respond. The mysterious stranger softened and seemed more kindly.

"I can't say that I know anything," he said, "and I don't even believe in punishment… and the thought of an old lady suffering gives me no pleasure. But the idea that maybe there is justice out there… goodness… it's all I have to go on."

He dropped his head and for a moment his guard. "Tom," he said, "I don't know. I hate this fucking world so much. I see so much shit I can't stand it. You've experienced some of it, but I *know* about so much more…"

He turned his head toward me and presented one of the most complex smiles I have ever observed. His mouth was a mixture of sadness and humor. His cheeks and nose were deep red while his eyes shimmered with what appeared to be a grotesque appreciation of the depravity of human life.

"You know," he said after a long pause, "I haven't even begun to tell you all we know."

He stopped speaking and seemed to be assessing me. "Do you want to know more?"

I could not resist. How could I say no? As I started to answer the thought flashed into my mind that where we were, outside on a train platform in Japan, coupled with the apparent randomness of our encounter, for I had no idea beforehand that it was going to happen, was the perfect place to speak in secret. No one had followed him or me, he could be sure of that from where we were sitting, and there were no microphones or bystanders that could possibly hear or record us.

"Yes, tell me whatever it is. I can take it."

He nodded. "You weren't just poisoned."

He must have seen me recoil with dread or foreknowledge of what he might say next because there was something I had suspected for a long time and that he had even alluded to earlier in our conversation.

"Mountebank," I said solemnly, leading him on.

"So you know."

"Yes, I think I do," I said, becoming much more emotional than I am used to.

"How do you know?"

"What she said and what the anesthesiologist said… How do you know?"

"Tom, we have studied you so much, it's obvious. Can you tell me what she said?"

I was having trouble speaking. I had never spoken of that day to anyone but had reflected on it many times through the years. It lived inside of me like an animal in a cave. It had never occurred to me that it was part of something bigger.

"I can't talk," I said.

My voice didn't sound like me. The air settled around my eyes. I was looking down.

"Yeah, take a minute," the stranger said.

"You've never said anything to anyone, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

"You feel ashamed, don't you?"

"Yes." It was a relief to hear him say that because I did feel ashamed but could never understand why.

"It happens. Severe trauma exists on a whole different level and the ordinary mind cannot comprehend it…"

He did know me. His explanation was the kind of thing I could accept and respond to. I was a hundred million years beyond emotion on this subject. What I wanted was abstractions.

"Take your time," he said. "One good way to work with information like this is relax and imagine you are watching the scene on a TV. That puts some distance on it and will let you describe it without becoming involved in it. Close your eyes if you want…"

I kept my eyes open but in my mind's eye I conjured a TV and watched my memory unfold.

When she came out to the hall where the nurse had left me, she said "there you are." She seemed cold to me but that is how she always was. Cold and somewhat angry. She wheeled my bed into the operating room, banging the side of it on the door frame. The anesthesiologist had dark hair and was friendly. They were busy for a minute or two, then the anesthesiologist said he was going to make me go to sleep and that I should count back from 100.

I counted very quickly and they both laughed.

"No, go slower," he said. His voice sounded amused.

In a moment I went under but remained conscious for awhile. I remember a very bright light shining in my eyes and feeling very happy, almost blissful. Then everything went dark…"

"Is that all you remember?" the stranger asked.

"No, that's just the first part," I said. "That just came out of me… I just said that without thinking."

"It's good. It's relevant. You have a bit of red in your hair and the kind of constitution that even at that age probably needed extra anesthetic to make you unconscious. What's the next thing you remember?"

"I remember sort of waking up. I couldn't move and probably appeared unconscious, though I don't know about that for sure. Then I heard the anesthesiologist, who was standing behind me say, 'Are you still gonna do that?'

"He was speaking to Mountebank, who was standing to my right side as I lay on my back. She didn't say anything. Then the anesthesiologist said, 'I don't think you should do that.'

"Mountebank replied in a very breezy tone, 'Oh, it's nothing. It just takes a minute.'

"'I really don't think you should do that,' the anesthesiologist said again, his pitch rising. Mountebank did not answer him but instead drew close to my face and spoke to me directly.

"She said, 'You will be fine. Your life will be pleasant with few worries.' Then in an ominous tone she added, "But you will disappoint many people.'

"Then she busied herself for a moment near the bed. I sensed her drawing close to me again. As she did, the anesthesiologist spoke again. He said, 'Well, you can kiss your life good-bye.'"

"My guess is he cranked up the anesthetic at that point because I don't remember anything more until I woke up in the post-op room vomiting violently. A nurse who was there came to my side. She held a pan for me to vomit into. At the time, she seemed to be angry with me, but I now realize that she was actually angry at Mountebank.

"'Why are you like this? You shouldn't be vomiting like this. Not after that operation…'

"As I continued to vomit copiously, she wailed, 'Oh, God.'

"I realize now that her tone was one of intense despair and pity, not anger. She must have known what had happened."

"What do you think happened?" the stranger asked.

I could not say the word. I only stared toward him helplessly.

I saw contempt and anger in his face, but knew now that like the nurse he was not mad at me but at Mountebank. His contempt was directed not at me but at her and at life itself for being so awful.

"You were thirteen. That's the age they get Bar Mitzvahed. But you got a lobotomy."

I couldn't say the word myself and still can't to this day, but it felt good to hear him say it, to have him acknowledge it.

Mountebank was sure right about one thing. I have disappointed many people. I am a walking disappointer of people. She was dead wrong about me having a pleasant life with no worries, though, because it saddens me immensely to be a walking disappointer of people. It's torture to know that I am a destroyed and defeated member of a group that is being relentlessly attacked by another group, challenged by many groups. My defeat and destruction is completely invisible to other people. Jews who barely know me laugh at me and mock me as I disappoint my own kind or prove to others—Chinese, Japanese, whomever—wherever I go that people like me have profound deficiencies even though I look just fine. What's even worse is I know there are many more like me.

I don't know how good I was, but I do believe the mysterious stranger is right that those of us who have been attacked and maimed cause great harm to our people, whoever they may be. People everywhere look to each other to understand themselves, to define themselves, to comprehend their place in the world. But when they look to me and my fellow maimed ones, they see profound fallibility even though the face and the voice and the body look just fine. This makes them—those who see us—wonder about themselves, doubt themselves. It tears the threads of culture and provides an example of failure and destitution in place of confidence and hope. I see signs of this everywhere.

I am sure similarly ruthless methods were used against children and adults by the Brothers of the Sword to control Baltic peoples and by Arenda lease-holders to control serfs in what was then Eastern Poland. Sadly, attacking and maiming the young is nothing new in human history. If you can't make them docile slaves at least render them incapacitated, a burden on others.

I get history and can't bring myself to feel sorry for myself for playing a very common part in it. I will have more to say about the effects of psychosurgery in a later section. For now, let me just say that a lasting effect has been that I always feel like I am flinching, like something is coming at me, about to poke me in the face or in my eye.

My destruction happened when I was thirteen. But I lost my father three or four years before that, right around the time that the Nazi sign appeared on the street.

I can't say for certain that the change that came over him happened at exactly that point in time, but I can say with great confidence that it was shortly after we moved into 15 Circle Road. My sister Mira and I have discussed that period many times and she claims that she also remembers him changing greatly after we moved to Circle Road.

Before he changed, he read to me, took me swimming and camping with Pep, took us on long hikes. We went fishing with him and I was always immensely proud to follow him around the yard on Lee Road, "helping" him do whatever needed to be done. Until he changed, he was the center of my world. I asked him questions constantly and remembered everything he said in reply.

I remember studying his hands one evening soon after we moved into 15 Circle Road. They were strong and warm and had very fine creases all over them. He sat in his big chair in the red room while I looked first at one hand and then the other, comparing the two with each other and with my own. I felt immensely proud when he said, "One day your hands will look like this." In that moment, that was all I wanted.

Up until he changed, he had the habit of caressing my face with his hand. He would usually start by covering my forehead and then sweeping down over the front of my face with his whole hand. Then he would sweep up and down again several more times. I always pushed my face into his palm and felt, in the best way, like a dog with his faithful guardian.

Then it all changed. He became gloomy and moody. Abrupt and often on the edge of anger. One evening, as was my habit, I went up the street to meet my father at the corner of Circle and Overhill roads. He almost always took the same train and almost always came up the hill at the same time, a few minutes past six o'clock.

I did what I always did. I grabbed the first two fingers of his right hand as we walked along toward home together. On that night, though, he did something he had never done before. He shook his fingers out of my hand and said testily, "Cut it out. You're too old for this."

I was shocked but did as he said. That was the last time I went up the street to meet him as he came home. On that late afternoon, I had no understanding of why he had been so stern with me. But today I believe the reason very probably is that he was being given the same sort of drug that Fecenian had given me in high school, and others in college and beyond. Today I understand that the sign in the street had marked a change that was to affect all of us.

One thing that bothers me about this tale is why have I waited so long to tell it? Why have I felt ashamed to tell it when I did nothing wrong? The mysterious stranger sensed my shame and explained it as a reaction to trauma. But I wonder, and have often wondered, did I feel ashamed because I have a slave mentality? Was that mentality taught to me in school and by Mountebank and the gaggle of poisoners who followed me everywhere? Or is it inscribed in my genes? Have we Balts and Slavs been down so long we have become as slaves? Why haven't I fought back? Why don't I want to? Am I so moral that I will not seek revenge? Or am I such a slave that I dare not seek it?

I do believe that a moral stance in most situations means that you have to absorb as much shit as you can without retaliating. There is so much shit in the world, some of us have to absorb it, have to break the long chains of evil action and reaction that have gone on for centuries. If I do not seek revenge on Mountebank, maybe that will be the end of that chain. If I do seek revenge on her, few will understand and my actions will add to the chain and lead to more problems for more people, problems that can multiply and spread out even into war.

But then, do I think all of that because deep down I have been bred to be a slave? I am strong and have taken an enormous amount of abuse without dying. But why? Isn't it because I am a slave? Isn't it true that I plod on just like a slave? You can beat me and I will continue to plod on. If people yell at me, I almost always freeze and go into a semi-transcendental state of obedience. Sometimes I stand up for myself verbally, but only if attacked. I haven't been in a physical altercation with anyone since I was a boy. Again and again, I retreat from aggressive people, retreat from their groups to be alone with my books and thoughts.

To me it seems like the behavior of a born slave. If I complain to Heidi about this, she says that she doesn't think I am a slave but that I am simply more civilized than other people because I am honest and truly care about them. "No one has ever paid any attention to them so when you try to understand them, they can't understand what you are doing." But that's just Heidi talking, and she is much like me. So I often reply that maybe we both were bred to be slaves.

I sat beside the mysterious stranger a while longer. I was frozen, stunned by what he had told me and what I had told him and how much he seemed to understand. He remained still for some time and then shifted his weight and rose.

I stood but had nothing to say.

He looked at me with more kindness than before and said, "I want you to know that we have you covered. You are as safe as you could be. If you rob a bank, you're gonna be in trouble, but it's not likely that anyone is going to fuck with you like that any more. We have assurances and we have ways of checking. Keep your eyes open. You can still get mugged or killed by a random maniac, but those shitheads should be off your back for good."

"Thanks for telling me that," I said.

"Be careful who you talk to about this because they might interpret it in the wrong way or say too much and get themselves into trouble."

"I do understand that," I said. And I did.

"It's a dangerous world."

"Yes, it is."

"We'll meet again before much longer," he said, "there's more to tell you."

He then leaned in toward me and studied me with an almost clinical expression, clearly assessing my capacity to hear more.

I was stalwart, slave-like, prepared for anything as I stood in front of him. He nodded at me several times and smiled lightly. Then he turned and left. I watched him walk down the platform toward the stairs to the city below.

Chapter Twenty-four

After we had been at 15 Circle Road for about six months, I reached a stage where nothing my mom said or did bothered me. I knew that she was senile and that she was no longer responsible for her actions.

One night as she was going upstairs, she called out to the quiet house as if she had just been asked a question, "I'm fine! Now I am going to my bedroom." A few moments later, I heard her say, "Well, I've made it! Good night, Thomas!"

I called down from the third floor where I was lying awake in bed, "Good night, mom!"

The next morning when she came down to breakfast, I asked her, "How are you today, mom?"

"Well, I'm here," she replied. "But I feel so *dumb*." She pointed to her head, jabbing her index finger into her temple with a mix of self-mockery and real feeling.

"You're doing pretty good, mom," I said.

"I don't know," she said solemnly. By this time, she was well aware of her declining mental powers, but rarely spoke of them or complained.

"You never know what you're going to be like at my age," she said slowly in a grave and ominous tone. Her old voice growled with ancient feeling as she peered at me knowingly.

"That's true, mom."

"Yes, it is."

As with all things, the moment passed quickly for her. As she straightened her napkin and fork, she asked, "Is there any toast? An egg on toast is all I want."

The three of us usually gathered in the kitchen for breakfast. Either I would make an egg for her or Heidi would.

When Heidi rose from the table to make the egg, my mom said forcefully, "Maintain those good looks! Keep them all your life and use them!"

I think it was good for Heidi to hear that so often even though she knew my mom would say it to anyone. Such is the power of words.

"Do you have a plan for today?" she asked.

During our first months with her, I thought this question—which she asked frequently—was simply a way for her to find something to talk about. In time, though, I learned that it was a very important question for her and that she wanted to have it answered in detail because her memory was so bad she did not know if we were going to stay for an hour or a year. She was also unable to remember if we had arrived just that morning or a month ago.

I answered her question slowly and carefully, including enough detail to calm her completely. She looked straight at me as a I spoke and nodded her head deliberately with each point I made. Satisfied with my answer, she turned her attention to Heidi who was frying her egg.

I then asked her, "Do you remember her name?"

I was hoping to teach her to remember Heidi's name, so I asked her a few times a day. It became a sort of game we played. Sometimes she was able to remember, but most of the time she could not. When she couldn't remember she would hang her head in mock chagrin and move it from side to side in a deeply self-aware parody.

"Maria?" she might say, clearly not sure of herself. The way she turned her blue eyes up to look at me like a little kid made me think that she enjoyed the questions.

"Nope, try again."

"Marissa?"

"Sorry mom."

"Well, I don't know," she would say. "Why don't you tell me?"

"Heidi," I would answer. I never asked her to guess more than two or three times.

"Oh, of course! Heidi! What a lovely name. Now, is that spelled with an "i" or a "y"?

This question showed that she had learned something about Heidi's name. "It's spelled with an 'i,' mom."

Then she would invariably spell the name out slowly, carefully enunciating each letter. "H E I D I, *Heidi*. I like that name! *Heidi*."

I knew that within a few more seconds she would forget the name, or that we had ever discussed it. Maria had been her housekeeper for some time, so many of her guesses about Heidi's name were permutations on that name—Marissa, Mary, Melissa, Catriona, Sophia, and so on. Sometimes, though, she reached way back into her past and her imagination for an unexpected name. "*Euripides!*" she said one day, to my delight, causing us all to laugh.

My mom had always had a very good vocabulary and a way with words. These abilities served her well in old age for she was usually able to get her message across, even if she could not call to mind a crucial term. For example, if I went to bed before her, which I often did, I would stand in the doorway of the red room and ask her to be sure to turn out the lights before going to bed herself. This routine became a ritual for us and she took it very seriously. She would lean forward in my father's chair and holding her hands together over her knees, repeat back to me what I had said word for word. After which, I would indicate which lights needed to be turned out. One night, though, she could not remember how to say "turn out the lights." Instead, she said, "So… you mean… eliminate turning them on?" I said, "Yes, that's right."

"You come from the *right* family!" she replied enthusiastically.

Sometimes, I would joke with her and say, "Just turn out whichever light is on, mom. Surely you can figure that out." This often made her laugh out loud and grin with pleasure.

Though I usually went upstairs before her, I rarely fell asleep until I had heard her make her way safely to her room. The creaking of the wooden stairs under her awkward weight was like a reaffirmation of the past, an echo of my father ascending the stairs when I was a boy, or my brother running down them.

Her days were generally very quiet and she was always happy to just sit and read the paper or enjoy her own thoughts. At some point, I realized that she spent an inordinate amount of time checking the date on the first page of *The New York Times*. She would go back and forth between looking at the date in the paper and then looking around the room. As I watched her, it occurred to me that she might like to have a message board with the day's date and some mention of the day's activities nearby.

Heidi and I got a white board and wrote the day's date across the top in large blue letters. Below that we wrote:

Quiet, relaxed day

Lunch at 12:00

Chicken soup and a sandwich

Drinks at five

Dinner at six

I drew a small cartoon of a boy in the corner of the board waving. As we stepped back to examine our work, which was lying on the kitchen table, we both became afraid that my mom might feel hurt by it.

"Do you think she will take it as an insult?" Heidi asked.

"I don't know. Maybe not an insult. But it might make her feel bad because it is so simple."

"Just be casual about it and tell her we'll put more information on it later."

"That's a good idea and it's true. We can add all the information she wants."

I carried the board to the sun porch where she was sitting and casually placed it on a wicker chair facing her.

She leaned forward to look at it closely.

Before I could say anything, she began reading the words out loud. She read the whole board slowly and carefully and when she was finished, straightened up and said, "Oh, I like that figure! Look, he's waving at me!"

It was good to see that she had accepted the board and could take pleasure in a simple drawing.

"Yes, he is," I said to her.

"*Friday, April third… Quiet, relaxed day…,*" she reread the message. "I like that! You *need* days like that sometimes."

She looked at me, waiting for confirmation.

"Yes, you do, mom."

"*Lunch at twelve… Chicken soup and a sandwich…* Perfect!"

"All your favorite foods, mom."

"I like that message board. It's very clear and lets me know what I am going to be doing today."

"I am glad to hear that, mom." The board was placed on an old wicker chair that I can still remember watching her paint with a can of white spray paint in the driveway thirty years before. I had sat in that chair many times while our dog, Cracker, lay in my lap, her belly warm against my thigh.

"Heidi and I will be around all day" I said. "I am going to do a few things in the yard and then some work on my computer."

"We are so lucky to have someone like *you* in the family! You're so kind, thoughtful, careful, artistic… And not only that but *everybody* likes you!"

Her enthusiasm for the board was carrying over to me and made me laugh, especially because I doubted every word and had never heard her say anything like that before.

I probably shouldn't stick this in here because it may give the wrong impression, but in more than a few ways, my mom was a more pleasant person in her old age that when she was young. The intellectual changes that arose from her sessions with her friends have been discussed, but even as her intellect declined and she became irremediably senile, her spirit and emotions remained elevated. She was more gentle, appreciative, considerate, and more fun to be around than when she was in her prime. It's not that she was dependent on me that made her more enjoyable, but rather that she was open to me, accepting of me. We traded many good jokes and spent many hours singing and commenting together on life, as she understood it.

If she was sitting on the sun porch in the late afternoon, I would often take out my guitar and play some songs for her.

One day when I was out there she said, "Tommy, when you play that guitar, I think you should wear a red wig. You should find one that you can just pop right on your head and no one will notice that it's there so you can enjoy yourself all day long."

"That's a great idea, mom," I said laughing. What a compliment to any musician.

While we were having drinks in the kitchen one evening, I went out back to pee near a large azalea that blocked the view of our neighbor toward our yard. When I came back into the kitchen through the back door, my mom said importantly, "Tommy, you're a big man. Don't cede *all* control!"

I said, "Mom, what are you talking about?"

She said, "I don't know. I don't know what I'm talking about." And looked very confused.

Another night around the same time, she looked across the table at me and said, "I love you and I'm glad you're here."

Since this was probably only the second or third time she had ever told me she loved me, I am not too ashamed to say I was struck dumb and could not reply. I just looked back at her and tried to smile. The first time she told me she loved me was in the front hall on 15 Circle Road.

For some reason we both were there. She sat on the stairs and looked sternly at me as I stood slightly below her in the hall.

"Tommy," she said, in crisp tones. "I want you to know that your father and I both love you very much."

I was even more dumbfounded then, as I was probably only about nine years old.

When I just stood there and said nothing in return, she said, "There…" somewhat under her breath and stood up. That seemed to mean that she had done what she set out to do and it had not gone too badly.

My guess is that the minister at church told the congregation that it is important to tell your kids you love them, and this was what my mom came up with. I was fine with that and never felt the need for her, or my father, to blubber to me about how much they loved me. I guess they made me in their own image, and I have accepted that in many ways.

One evening, she was singing in the red room as I accompanied her on guitar. Suddenly, she stopped signing and commented on my socks.

"Tommy, do you like *white* socks?"

"Yeah, I like them. White socks are normal nowadays." I knew her fashion sense did not include the contrasting aesthetic of white socks and blue jeans.

"But why?… For publicity purposes?"

"That's right, mom."

On another night we had no power in the house because a big storm had downed some wires.

My mom asked repeatedly what was going on. After hearing me describe yet again what had happened, she said, "Is there any indication of restoration?"

I said, "Mom, it's nice like this. We get to use candles and enjoy the quiet… the way it was in the old days before electricity."

"That doesn't put the thinking brain on," she replied.

"What does put the thinking brain on, mom?"

"Activity, thoughtfulness, helping others, helping yourself, things like that."

"But not sitting in the dark?"

"No, not sitting in the dark."

I took up my guitar again and played a tune that we had made up together. This tune was one that she could sing whatever she wanted and I encouraged her to do that.

"Make up a song about the lights, mom," I said as I started playing the familiar tune.

She sang spontaneously:

Why is this the special night

When lights are out and all is dark

I hope that all will rise and shine

To make it right

And put things back in order

I would greatly appreciate that

Thank you very much

Then after a minute or so she continued singing:

Here in this big old house

We have some lights in the red room

They are candle lights…

Bright and shining is the light

The strength of the candle in the house

May we always rise and shine

To know the safety that's inside

The next morning she got up and came downstairs very early. As she sat in the kitchen by herself, Heidi heard her say from another room, "Do I go back to bed? I'd like to go back to bed, but I'm sitting here dressed! Somebody's got to help me because I don't know what's going on! I think I'll go back to bed. But somebody, give me coffee! I'd better drink that first."

At that, Heidi went into the kitchen and my mom said to her, "Imagine me being up at this hour. Nutty! That's what I am… Nutty Julie! This is the first time this has ever happened in my life!"

After a pause, my mom continued, "I had a wonderful life. Kind, thoughtful, considerate, caring people helping me all the time."

Chapter Twenty-five

Dementia begins to show in the eyes which gradually acquire a tender autonomy of not knowing. In profile, they may seem to be looking at nothing even when they are looking at something. Viewed from the front, they increasingly appear disconnected from thought, from awareness.

My mom showed some of these signs very slightly when we saw her after returning from Ukraine. I can see them today in a few of the photos I took of her then. In one profile, snapped in the dining room, she is staring toward a far wall. Her eyelid is raised in expectation of the shutter while her eyeball appears vacuous, glassine, almost moronic. Her face is pleasurably reddened by the attention she is receiving and with her innate sociability, but it too looks off, as if she cannot compute the multiple impressions of being in her dining room along with me and my camera. I am not sure if I noticed this at the time and repressed it or if it is one of those things you only notice in a photo years after it was taken.

By the time we moved back home to live with her, her facial expressions had become inescapably less attentive, less aware, less nuanced. A hallmark of Dementia with Lewy Bodies is large shifts in consciousness acuity from day to day or even moment to moment.

One morning after we had been there about two years, she surprised me with a gift of communication I will never forget. We were in her bathroom where I was helping her get ready for the day. She was sitting on the toilet, acting mildly disgruntled at being up and having to do her morning ablutions. I was standing near her, watching and helping her as needed. It was a familiar scene for both of us, even if she had no explicit memories of it.

As I watched her fumble with the buttons of her sweater in her lap, she stopped and turned to face me, tilting her head up to look me directly in the eye. Her face was filled with an astounding clarity of purpose. She looked to me like the mom I had known forty years before. Her expression and eyes were fully animated with a deep interpersonal awareness that appeared almost surreal it was so normal. As I stared at her in amazement, she said to me in a strong, clear voice, "Tommy, I want you to know that I know what you are doing for me." She held my eyes, "And I want you to know that I appreciate it very much." We continued to look at each other for another second or two before she dropped her head and recommenced fumbling with the sweater in her lap. Almost immediately, she became senile again, muttering and fussing, working her lips in synchrony with the problem before her.

As I looked over her head, I could see the black walnut tree in the backyard through the bathroom window. I remembered breaking that window shortly after my father died, over thirty years before.

My mom had wanted me to paint the bathroom with a fresh coat of white paint, and to do that I began by trying to open that window, which had been painted shut from the outside when we had had the exterior of the house painted many years before.

It was one of those old style windows with ropes on the sides attached to pulley weights hidden in the frame. I had considerable experience opening and closing that kind of window because we had them all over the house. Nonetheless, I was profoundly distraught over my father's death and not nearly as careful as I should have been. Using the heels of my hands as contact points, I thrust my arms up against

the wooden frame of the window, hoping to break the sealed paint. At that time, and for a span of many months, I felt as if I were in the midst of an ancient Greek play, a tragic one whose plot I did not know. None of us knew how to deal with death, and the death of my father left a fiery, dark vacuum in the midst of the family. My mom was alternately sad or stalwart. Sometimes she was angry, accusing me of not being home when he died. I had been in Taiwan and had gone with her full blessing—and my father's—but she seemed to have forgotten. I took it as her way of expressing grief, lashing out at her son, trying to reassert control over her own life.

As I smashed upward at the wood of the window, trying to work it free, my hand slipped and broke the glass. I received a deep gash in the heel of my hand. As the sound of falling glass on the tile floor withdrew into memory, I arranged my hand over my mom's sink and let it bleed. I pushed at the flesh below the gash to squeeze blood and any germs or debris out from the wound. My mom must have heard the glass break because she came hurriedly into the bathroom as I held my arm over the sink.

"Tommy, what did you do?" she asked. The broken window and glass on the floor answered her question for me. "That looks pretty bad," she said, taking stock of my injury and the blood in the sink.

"I'll be alright," I said, reaching into the medicine chest for a bandage.

My mom then spoke from deep within the ancient Greek drama I was feeling around me, temporarily ignoring my hand.

"Tommy, I don't want you to do anything more in this room. I don't even want you to fix the window. This happened because you are still upset over your father. It wasn't right for me to ask you to do this."

"Mom, I'm OK. I can do this. It won't even take that long." I had done a great deal of painting and general fixing up around that house, and was no stranger to cuts or bruises. I especially liked that room because Mira had stenciled a leafy pattern around the top of the walls.

"No, I don't want you to do anymore and I mean it." The way she phrased that—"and I mean it"—meant there was little room for further appeal. For my part, I realized that she was also reacting to my father's death, filling herself with a sense of purpose and urgency that did not reflect the reality of my condition or the job ahead but only her own emptiness.

"OK," I said. "I'll do something else instead." There was an intense exchange of human feeling between us at that moment. I realized that my mom had seen something in me that I had not seen in myself because suddenly I felt greatly relieved at the thought of being able to quit that job.

My body relaxed as I slumped and leaned over the sink to affix the bandage.

"I should never have asked you to do this," she said again. "I'll clean this up. I want you to go downstairs now *and stay out of this room.*" She was emphatic. She sounded like a voice warning me of a curse having to do with the room.

"OK, mom," I said. "I won't do any more in here."

I may have gone into that bathroom a few times between then and the day we returned to care for my mom, but I never stayed long. It embodied or symbolized something of my father, who had showered and stood naked in that room on so many mornings before going to work. It was his room and we should not touch it. My mom never had the room painted. When the shower failed, she turned off the

water going into it. And when her bathtub stopped draining properly, she turned it off as well. The old-style shower stall which was tiled with white tiles became a sort cenotaph to my father. My mom kept towels hanging on the opaque glass door for years as if he might still return to use them.

Turning my attention from the past, I broke my reverie and told my mom that there was hot coffee and food in the kitchen and that we would be waiting for her to come downstairs.

"Hot coffee," she said. "Oh, boy! I like that!"

"Hot coffee, scrambled eggs, toast, orange juice… all your favorite foods, mom."

"Oh boy, am I lucky!"

We had that same exchange on many mornings. Repeating our parts over many months probably provided her with a sense of stability, and it always perked up her mood, giving her clear feelings of camaraderie and something to look forward to.

We had learned that her pleasures were found in small things—lingering over coffee in the morning, reading the same magazine for hours on the sun porch, gazing out the window in the red room at the occasional passerby—and we had learned to let her draw them out as long as she liked.

She was able to call up deeply satisfying feelings of contentment doing the simplest of things. In this sense, her world, and the worlds of many people with dementia, I am sure, was very rich and enjoyable. She took real pleasure in the sun coming in the window, the patterns it cast on the floor or on her face.

There were many times when I watched her puzzle over something she was seeing outside the red room. "What is that, Tommy?" she might ask me.

"What, mom?"

"That thing on the front walk… don't you see it?"

"There is a small branch on the walk, mom. Is that it?"

"No, it's not a branch. Tommy, can you go look for me?"

I would then go out the front door and pick up the branch or whatever I thought she might have seen. Then I would wave it over my head for her to see and then bring it inside so she could look at it more closely.

"Is this it, mom?"

"Yes, I guess so," she would say obviously pleased that the mystery had been solved even as she wondered how it had ever occurred. "Now, why did I think that was a package? Huh…"

"I don't know, mom. Maybe it was in a shadow on the ground or the window was dirty."

"I suppose…"

Sometimes she would be fooled by a pile of leaves blown together in an autumn breeze, or by a clump of snow that had fallen from the oak tree that towered over the walk and the house. I learned that it was best to let her enjoy the mystery and wonder over what it was before going outside to carry the thing in

to her.

Heidi and I had come to the conclusion that we would let her words have as much weight and power as we could honestly let them have. This meant that if she were enjoying a mystery, we would wonder about it with her. And when she asked me to go outside and see what it was, I would do it and not say it was nothing to bother with. I believe this made her feel very secure around us. If she spoke a nonsensical "word salad," we would try to make some sense of it, try to answer in some way that did not make her feel cut off from us, from communicating with us.

Since she had fewer opportunities to use language and fewer people to speak to, as almost no one visited her anymore, it was natural on that score alone that she might get a little rusty with words. Senility is not just a loss of skills. It is also a gaining, or regaining, of the heart, an opening of the core of the person, at least it was for her. Sitting in my father's old chair looking out the window, she might respond to me as I appeared in the doorway, "Szhhg mufff dou…. dat, that near parrot." If as she was speaking she also took glances out the window, I might reply, "What are you seeing out there, mom?" And often that would give her back her voice: "There's something on the walk, Tommy. Do you know what it is?"

We also felt that we should respectfully and tenderly make her do as much as she could for herself. We knew that as soon as she stopped exercising any skill, she would lose it. One morning when I took a break from working upstairs, Heidi told me that mom had become impatient with her shoes, which had come untied, and wanted Heidi to tie them for her. "Can you *please* help me with these shoes," she had called out to Heidi who was in another room. Her tone was frustrated, bordering on whining. An advantage of senility is that her frustrated state would not be held in mind for long or remembered afterward.

"I just ignored her as we had agreed. Went into the kitchen about two minutes later and her shoes were tied and she had forgotten the whole thing," Heidi said.

One day she stayed in bed very late and did not come down to the kitchen until 2:45. As she advanced down the pantry hall toward the table, I teased her a little. "Alright, mom! It's quarter to three and you're up… just in time for dinner…"

She was disheveled and looked out of sorts as she hung her cane on the back of her chair and slowly sat down. I assumed she had not heard me or had forgotten what I said. As she gained a secure balance in her seat, she inhaled and looked at me resolutely.

"Don't rub it in," she said.

We liked to have her sit on the sun porch in the evening when it got dark because there was no telephone in that room. If she sat in her other favorite place—the red room—she would almost certainly decide to call "the operator" about the non-existent street light not being on.

One night as she sat in the red room, she called the operator and said, "Operator? Are there supposed to be streetlights in Scarsvale at this hour? Because we're completely black…"

Then there was a long pause and mom said, "I hear you talking but I do not understand *a word* you are saying."

Heidi went into the red room at that point and held up a note we had gotten my mom to write in her own hand and had placed near her phone. It said: *No streetlight here. Do not call*. My mom held the note in her hand scrutinizing her own handwriting carefully. Then she said into the phone, "Operator, I have

a note here that says *no streetlight*… Operator, I think I better hang up…"

Soon after, I went into the room to sit with her. She got onto the subject of the streetlight immediately. She said that the "proper authorities" should be called and hinted strongly that I was the person to call them.

When I said that there was no point in doing that, she replied vigorously, "Well, *somebody's* got to be in charge! Somebody's got to say, We Want Lamps!"

Heidi and I enjoyed that line and her enthusiasm in saying it and we playfully spoke it to each other sometimes. We did that with a good many of the things she said. I suppose it was a sort of reverse method acting where we took on her tone and temperament and words to gain a deeper understanding of her. She was long past being able to explain her inner state with any detail.

"I do what I can" was another one of her lines that we very much enjoyed, and still use to this day. She employed it more than once in response to teasing comments from me or a simple question about why she had or had not done something, like finish her lunch.

"I do what I can, Tommy," she would reply with the even delivery of a very old woman who was content with things just as they are.

A younger person would be more likely respond defensively, "I'm doing the best I can!" But at my mom's age, she no longer felt pressure to defend herself or parry the question. She felt she could simply answer flatly, "I do what I can" and that would be enough, and it was.

One evening when Heidi and I returned from our usual walk around Berkley Pond, my mom called out, "Come in here and sit with me whoever you are…"

As we hung our coats in the closet, she waited and then called out again, "Tommy, Tom, come in here and play something. You have the tool." She often called my guitar a tool, banjo, or violin. Sometimes she called it a guitar, too.

I went in to see her on the sun porch and she sang as I played. During a break, she asked me,"Tommy, do you ever play at any sort of a house or home or… café or anything?"

I said, " I have no interest in playing in a café and I doubt anyone would want to listen to me."

"Oh, well, I don't think you'd be happy playing in a café. You're too thoughtful, too kind, too intelligent… and too good-looking!"

As I started to leave when I felt we had played enough, she asked me to stay and talk some more.

"What do you want to talk about, mom?"

She said, "You tell me what sort of architect you are and I'll tell you about being a seamstress."

"OK," I said and proceeded to talk about architecture for a bit. "Now, you tell me about being a seamstress."

She had lost the thread of our conversation by that point and just gazed at me while leaning forward with a huge smile on her face. It was a very characteristic gesture of hers—she would wrap her arms around her waist and lean forward, propping her forearms lightly on her thighs while smiling broadly

as if we were both up to some mischief.

One morning while in the bathroom, she refused to change her diapers. "They're *not* dirty," she said to me.

"They're filthy," I said. "If you can't tell that these are dirty, you're out of your mind. They weigh about two pounds!"

"They're not dirty," she repeated. "That's just due to liquid that has accumulated."

How many moms and dads get sent to nursing homes over such a small matter? It was often a bit of a chore to get her to change or wash her hands, but it was never that big of a problem. Just a few minutes here and there during the day. Still, I do understand the revulsion people feel toward bodily waste as well as loved ones who barely resemble what they once were.

My niece visited once after not seeing her grandma, my mom, for some time. She came into the kitchen after her short visit balling her eyes out.

"It makes me so sad to see her like that," she said, tears pouring forth from her eyes. "She used to be so… so *with it*. I learned so much from her."

Turning to Heidi, she continued, "I wish you could have known her when she was well. She was so sharp, always on the ball… but now…"

She was reacting to the changes that had occurred in my mom since she last had visited her. It was hard for Heidi and me to see my mom like that, as a vastly different person every six months or so. We also did not feel sad about her condition because we knew she was not only content, but happy most of the time.

The kitchen chair creaked as my niece worked to compose herself. As I watched her dry her eyes with very little empathy, I realized that as care-givers largely confined to my mom's house, Heidi and I ran the risk of getting a little weird. For a stretch of two years while we were there, I did not leave my mom's property before nightfall even once. I don't know why I did that. Partly it was the lingering shame the mysterious stranger had divined in me and partly it was simply a free-floating shame for being alive at all.

My niece stayed with us in the kitchen for a while longer. I did what I could to make up for my deficiencies. She talked about her children and her life in a town a few hours from Scarsvale. She also spoke of her grandmother, my mom.

"She was such a role model for me. I lived here with her for two years while I went to school in the city and every night when I came home she had dinner ready and stayed to talk with me. She taught me so much. She was so strong. She talked about grandpa a lot and how much she missed him. And she encouraged me so much. Her having a law degree really made me feel that I could do anything."

Then she laughed in gentle self-mockery and rose to take a beer from the refrigerator. We talked some more and reminisced about the past that was still vivid in our old house, very little of which had changed over the years.

I did some math after my niece left and realized that when she was in grad school and living with my mom, my mom would have been doing the sessions with her friends. So, my niece must have contributed to the changes I saw in my mom as well as benefited from them.

Later that day, I went to see my mom in the sun porch where she was sitting. It was a beautiful sunny day with rich beams of light streaming through the windows.

"How are you doing, mom?" I asked.

"I don't know. Not too well," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's dark and here I sit."

I wondered if the visit from my niece had caused her to feel blue but did not ask because she would surely have no explicit memory of it. Feeling blue is not all bad and maybe she was dreaming as she sat on her wicker couch with a stack of magazines on either side. As I write this now I am aware that our old house is gone—sold to someone else and torn down—that house which was filled with so many memories of my mom's life and ours. Who is dreaming now, I wonder?

Later that day she said to me, "If you want to go somewhere, maybe I can go with you."

"Where would you like to go?" I asked.

"Oh, Eastchester or the South Pacific."

"Really, you want to go to the South Pacific?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't mean the South Pacific. I mean, the southern element of our existence."

That seemed like a good way to put it. My mom was taking us to the southern element of our existence and we were going along for the ride.

Chapter Twenty-six

One evening I was playing guitar with my mom. She started asking about the streetlight and I responded by giving her a little grief. In response to my less than sympathetic words, she started making repetitive slapping motions in my direction, as if she were going to hit me or was trying to wave me away.

"What are you doing, mom?" I asked.

"Slap, slap, slap," she said rhythmically as she moved her arm.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Slap him, slap him, slap him till he says he likes it." She gave me a weird look as if leering at me out of a dream and then sat back to laugh out loud. I laughed with her and before long we were playing and singing again.

The next day, Carol stopped by. Heidi overheard her telling my mom that she was going to be taking care of Kristy that afternoon. She explained that Kristy was her son's daughter.

"Do you remember Tom and Lena, mom? Your grandchildren?" she asked.

"Carol, you have to understand that at my age I can get very forgetful. It's not that I *intend* to be that way. I just *am*, *automatically*."

A few days later, while Mira was visiting, mom fell in her bathroom. She slightly bruised the left side of her head and complained of a sore left leg. She seemed a bit down for a few days due to the spill. We watched her and were concerned about her condition, but she recovered quickly.

"Carol, Mira, Tommy, Pep. Four of you," we heard her say from where she was sitting on the sun porch. She often sang out our names in a rhythmic sing-song voice that was quite beautiful. But this time she spoke them with declarative force. She sounded very pleased and proud. My mom forgot many things, but she almost never forgot the names of her children and only very rarely failed to recognize us, including recognizing our voices on the phone.

Later that evening around nine o'clock I heard her calling, "Tommy or Lena? Please come in and visit!"

I was busy in another room and did not go to see her right away. After a few minutes she called again, "Please come to the red room, *whoever* you are and *wherever* you are! Please come. I need a friend."

As I went into the red room to spend some time with her, she said, "I feel so dumb." She pointed to her head and screwed her finger back and forth to indicate that she was nuts. It was a gesture she made with some frequency. It was usually accompanied by an ironic, self-deprecating expression mixed with humor and despair. If I smiled, as I usually did, and said, "You're not so dumb, mom. For your age, you are doing very well," she would often look relaxed and quickly change modes. Nothing stayed in her mind very long, so even when she despaired at her condition and looked severely stressed, the feelings passed very quickly.

"Is it easy to acquire that tool out on the market?" she asked, indicating my guitar with her eyes.

"Yes, it is," I said.

"Is that *your* guitar?"

"Yes it is."

"Does it stay here?"

"It goes with me wherever I go," I said.

"Oh good," she replied. "I want to buy another one for you. One that will stay here."

"OK, mom. I hope you will."

"How much do they cost?" she asked.

"A really good one might cost a few thousand dollars."

"A few thousand dollars?" she asked, looking very surprised.

"Yes, they can be very expensive."

"Well, I want to get one for you anyway."

She frequently offered to buy guitars for me and her expressions were always very warm and caring when she did. I never took her up on the offer, but it did delight me to hear her talk like that and look at me in such a kindly manner. I often told her at this point that she had bought me my first guitar, a Gibson B25 acoustic purchased in 1965. I had been playing a very cheap $20 guitar for a couple of years before that, so the Gibson was a huge upgrade.

"I did?" she usually asked.

"Yes, you did. We went into New York City together and you bought me the guitar. I still have it and still play it often."

"You take right after your father!" Then she paused and said, "He was a wonderful man…" She looked toward the darkened window and asked, "Where is he now?"

Her tone was soft and thoughtful and did not require an answer from me. I couldn't bring myself to say the words anyway, so I said nothing.

The next morning she sat on the side of her bed for several hours. Each day, she took a little longer to get going. It wasn't a serious matter, but we did want to be careful to keep her on a more or less normal schedule to avoid having her get up in the middle of the night. Sometimes she would wake up in the middle of the night and call out to us or have long conversations with imaginary beings in her room. One of us, often Heidi who was a lighter sleeper than me, would then have to go downstairs and sit with her to be sure she didn't try to get out of bed and hurt herself.

A symptom of DLB is a condition called *Rapid eye movement sleep behavior disorder* (RBD). RBD basically means that the person experiencing it can move while dreaming. Movements can be as slight as twitching or they can involve walking and gesturing. When my mom experienced these states, she would usually stay on her bed but make urgent motions to get up to "go to the train station" or "back home."

When one or both of us came down during one of her RBD dreams during the night, she would incorporate us into whatever drama she was experiencing. "Julia, it's time for sleeping now," Heidi said one night when my mom was in the midst of an RBD episode.

"No, I have to get to the train station. Can you help me?"

I entered the room at this moment and saw her straining to get up while reaching toward the door. As she saw me, she said, "Tommy! I have to get to the train station! I have to get home right away!"

Her state was agitated or energized, but she did not appear distressed. She looked like she was dreaming. The first few times we saw her in that state we didn't know what was happening. After we learned about DLB, we had a better sense of what was going on.

"Julia, you *are* home," Heidi said.

"I *am*?" she replied, seeming to have some sense of where she was.

"Yes," Heidi said, sitting on the bed beside her. "This is your room. You are in your house."

"You mean *this* is my room?"

"Yes, it is, mom," I said.

"Oh, Tommy, no. I don't think so. I have to get to the train station. Call the minister!"

We just waited at that point. After a few more minutes she became calm and willingly went back to bed, remembering nothing of what had happened.

Her RBD generally occurred near the peak of an extended period of high energy. Sometimes it indicated the beginning of a high energy state. During those periods, which could last for as long as five days, she would be full of energy and more talkative than usual.

The next morning, I got up around four o'clock. As I came down the stairs near her room, she called out to me, "Hi!"

I said, "Hi, mom" and continued on my way. It was not unusual for her to call out to me and then sleep for several more hours. I went into my computer room down the hall from her bedroom. Then I went to the kitchen to make coffee.

When I went back upstairs about ten minutes later, I was startled to see her standing at my computer desk.

"Mom, what are you doing?" I asked.

"Where are my pants? I'm looking for my pants."

She was standing in her diapers with no shirt on looking at the surface of a table near my desk.

"Mom, it's very early. You should be in bed now."

By this time, she was feeling tired and had lost her sense of mission. I took her arm and slowly walked with her back to her bedroom. She got into bed and I covered her with her blankets. She seemed confused but content to be lying down. I stood beside the bed for a few minutes and watched her fall asleep.

Later that afternoon, she appeared hyper-naturally lucid during a short conversation on the sun porch. As I entered the room, she was sitting on her couch as always.

"Oh, hi, October," she said when she saw me.

For a second I wondered if she had had a stroke. Her expression was profoundly animated as if she were aware of something real that normal people cannot see. Her eyes gleamed and her face was flushed with blood.

"Tommy, can you help me?" she asked.

"How can I help you, mom?"

"Introduce me to new ideas that suit me better."

"What kind of ideas do you like?"

"I don't know, Tommy, I don't know. I'm full of beans."

"Full of beans?"

At that, we both started laughing. My mom beamed at me, now with a deep sense of mirth in her eyes.

"Tommy, what should I do?" she asked.

"Why don't you turn that light on above you?"

She reached up for the switch. After she turned it on, she said, "I was sitting in a dark corner and now it's lit."

A few days later, I went into the red room in the evening and she said, "The black light is on…The black light comes on as it gets dimmer outside and it covers all of Scarsvale. I hate that black light."

"Which black light, mom?"

"The dark light."

"You don't like it when it gets dark? Is that what you mean?"

"I don't like the dark look of the light. I don't like the dark look of the light, which goes on from night to day."

Chapter Twenty-seven

My mom probably did have a thing about doctors. Not only was she was completely taken in by Mountebank's flattery and fake camaraderie, but before I went to Mountebank—I guess I should say before *we* went to Mountebank—we went to another eye doctor who was very nice to me, but always had my mom wait outside his examination room and wasn't as friendly to her. His diagnosis was leave the eye be. Its "laziness" is very minor and may even correct itself, he said, and an operation could make things worse. This was either not what my mom wanted to hear or not what she wanted to get from our visits to the doctor.

I suppose I am implying that my mom did have Munchhausen's syndrome by proxy, but let me back away from that at least to some extent, because what right do I have to diagnose my mom so many years later and after she is in no position to explain herself? Deep down, I can't honestly say I know what her thing with doctors was, but she did have some problems with a dentist, who I also saw and who also had problems with me due in part to my mom.

Her main thing with this dentist was she opposed dental x-rays, or at least a lot of them. Given the time period, 1950s into the early 1960s, her position does not seem unreasonable to me as x-rays were stronger then and they are still a concern today if overused. For some reason, she ended up fighting with the dentist over his use of x-rays and generating emotions in him which must have been strong and not wholesome.

I learned about these arguments from her at home. Her descriptions were brief, but she was clearly upset with his insistence on taking so many x-rays. The mysterious stranger, who knew about the dentist, marveled that my mom believed she could argue with a doctor and continue to safely send her children

to him. The stranger's tone was one of sad wonderment when he said, "She thought she could do that…" He seemed to be implying that in a better world, she would have been able to do just that, but not in this one.

Anyway, he was also my dentist and he apparently took revenge on me for my mom's disagreeing with him. Or maybe he just didn't like me either. Before I went to his office soon after her most recent fight with him, my mom told me quite forcefully not to allow him to take any x-rays.

I told him what my mom had said and explained that I also thought that it was a bad idea. I remember telling him that the people in the office on the other side of the wall or across the street might even be harmed by the x-rays. I don't know if that is possible or not, but it made him furious to hear me say that. As his face reddened and his voice rose in exasperation, he gasped, "You're saying that just because of your *mother*…"

At that, I backed down and said it was OK to take the x-rays. I was about nine years old. Well, he x-rayed my mouth for a long time after that. I can remember sitting there in his chair as the x-ray machine clicked away for a very long time. The mysterious stranger even knew about this incident, and he told me that x-ray machines in the old days could be held open for a long time. He said he thought the dentist was out to do me harm. I remember him turning his face down and shaking his head in contempt for that dentist. "Another reason he may have done that is you used to play on the World War II monument in Boniface Circle, didn't you?"

Boniface Circle was the street just below his window. It surrounded a small park, with a couple of benches and a local World War II monument. "Did he ever say anything about you playing there?"

I guess the stranger had interviewed one of my old friends because we had played in and around the monument, which was set in one corner of the small park. The names of men from Scarsvale who had been killed in the war were—and still are—inscribed on some plaques which are the focus of the monument. You have to go down a couple of stone steps to get to the area where the plaques are set into a stone wall. That area was a good place to sit or play and we had used it occasionally to relax or talk when I was nine or ten years old. Sometimes we climbed on the wall that held the men's names. We didn't go there often, but we did sometimes stop by when we were in Scarsvale Village.

I cannot with certainty say that the dentist had spoken to us but I do remember a man saying something to us at least once while we were playing around the monument. I don't remember exactly what he said but I think he did tell us to leave, which we probably did. I remember that what he said did not make much sense to us because we weren't being noisy or doing much at all. I bet my friend was able to recognize the dentist and gave that information to the mysterious stranger. My lazy eye has left me with poor facial recognition skills.

"The thing that's crazy about all that is those men whose names are on those plaques would have liked nothing more than to have a couple of little kids play there," the stranger said. "That's what they fought and died for! Why else did they go to war except to preserve the freedoms of this country?"

He scowled. "This world is dangerous. You don't want people like that to even notice you. A lot of people thought that he was a paragon of dentistry, almost the perfect dentist, but he wasn't."

The other thing the dentist did was unnecessarily drill and fill cavities that did not exist in my teeth.

"That may have been the end of you right there," the stranger said referring to the possibility that the dentist had added extra mercury to the fill. Some years after that, the same dentist drilled a chipped tooth of mine without using Novocain. I can vividly remember rising as if by levitation through pain out of my chair as he told me to sit down and stay still because he had to "feel where the nerve is."

If readers are wondering why I generated so much hate in those days, all I can say is I don't know. Was it my mom? My dad? Me? The dentist was not Jewish so he's wasn't involved in any of that. Was there some sort of village grapevine that had condemned me? I really don't know. One reason for the dentist's behavior may have been mercury poisoning. He was near the end of his career when I went to him. Born in 1875 or so, he had probably absorbed a lot of mercury from doing fillings.

At that time Mountebank's office was in the same building—the Harwood Building—as the dentist's office. Strange as it may sound due to the bad things that happened there, the Harwood Building to this day is one of my favorite buildings in the world. I love the way it looks and the feeling of being in it, riding the ancient elevators slowly up or down or getting lost in the dimly lit basement which had several mysterious storerooms and was rarely visited by adults. There is a wide hall through the middle of the Harwood Building and sometimes we would buy cigarettes in a vending machine at one end of the hall. They sold for 25 cents a pack and the machine made a lot of noise when you pulled the knob, so we had to be careful with our timing. In the winter you could sit on covered radiators in that hall to get warm.

By the time I was in college, Mountebank had moved her office from the Harwood Building to one on Main Street in White Plains. Though my mom either knew or suspected what Mountebank had done to me, in her weird innocence or need, she took me to see her one more time. The reason for going was my complaining of having trouble reading. My eyes were often getting tired and my major, Chinese language and literature, required a great deal of reading.

As soon as we entered her office, as if she had been waiting for us, Mountebank strode toward my mom with a huge beaming smile on her face.

My mom reciprocated like a Munchhausen by proxy person with a huge beaming smile on her face. The two of them stood there and gazed into each others' eyes while maintaining broad smiles. My mom looked like a little kid in the presence of celebrity or even a hero. Her face reddened with pleasure and glowed even more when Mountebank said, "Look at those eyes, Julia! So full of life!" My mom straightened even more and squared her shoulders even more. A birdlike noise of pleasure issued from her throat.

"How have you *been*…?" Mountebank continued, her voice rising toward climax.

In retrospect, I think Mountebank's coming forward so aggressively when we arrived was her way of forestalling the possibility of a confrontation with me or my mom. She came out with a strong front because she could not have known if my mom was angry with her or if she was the same old Munchhausen person as before. Mountebank was a slender woman with good posture and a reasonable face. Engaging my mom in an embrace of mutual beaming in the middle of her waiting room must have brought her a good deal of relief, both because she felt she was in the clear and because her guilt, if she felt any, could be buried again.

I know my mom looks ridiculous in this description but that's what happened. At the time, I remembered my operation but did not understand the meaning of what I had overheard during it. As I stood next to the two women, who entirely ignored me, my body, my being, knew it was all wrong and I

felt horribly gloomy.

An old man came up to us and was introduced by Mountebank. When I shook his hand, I squeezed too hard. He pulled his hand back with a look of pain. I felt even more confused.

Later, as I sat in her examination chair, I asked Mountebank about my eye fatigue and reading problems and if I should consider a different major.

She answered in a supremely confident voice, "Your eyes are fine! You can do anything you want with them!"

Then she left to go into another examination room where I could hear her tell a young woman whom I had seen from the waiting room, "You see, *he* isn't complaining at all. *He* has much worse problems than *you*, but *he* doesn't complain."

Years later, my mom referred to that visit while we were having lunch in the Chinese restaurant. "Why did she say that?" she asked me. "Why did she say that *you* had much worse problems than her? She gave you that operation so you would be able to see *better*, not *worse!* Oh, Tommy, I don't know. What did she do to you? How could that have happened? And why didn't I do anything about it? What's wrong with me? Why did I take you back there to *her?* If someone had done something like that to *her* son, she would have fought back. She would have killed them. But I did nothing."

My mom was so forlorn when she said that, I can't find a bit of anger for her. I can't blame her or condemn her in any way. I do wonder if she was manifesting the same slave mentality on that day in Mountebank's office I often suspect in myself.

Our conversation in the Chinese restaurant was the first time we acknowledged in each others' presence that Mountebank had done something terrible to me. Neither of us said the word, but I knew that my mom knew and she knew that I knew.

My visit to Mountebank ended with her declaring that I needed new glasses but that she did not prescribe lenses, so maybe I could go across the street where there was an optometrist to get them. She indicated the glass windows of a shop across the street which we could see from the window of her second-floor office.

"Practically all she did was prescribe lenses," the second mysterious stranger said to me. "Very few people used her as a surgeon. She gave a few other people that same operation and it did not turn out well for any of them. She never did that operation on any Jews."

Chapter Twenty-eight

I met the second mysterious stranger in California. I had seen him before and even knew his name due to mutual friends. He unloaded encyclopedic knowledge about my past. He even knew things I had never told anyone.

"Your car was bugged, that's how we know. So was the apartment above your friend's place. We actually rented that apartment to bug his place when you went over."

"What for?"

It was like I had asked him a question about philosophy.

"Look, I am sorry. I am. Deeply sorry" he said. "You guessed right—you were put on a list. We can't figure out how you got there and we don't know how you got moved to a really bad list. According to what we know, you have been considered one of the worst. No one I know thinks that's right. You're a bit of an ass, it's true, but you haven't ever done shit to any of us. It's complete bullshit and, I'm telling you, a lot of people feel bad about it."

This second mysterious stranger was Jewish, so I understood what he meant immediately.

"Some people think it was Denny Dink, your old friend in college…"

"Denny? What the fuck? We were good friends…"

"Maybe not. You two used to hang out a lot and then you didn't. Do you know why?"

"We just drifted in different directions. Pretty normal for eighteen, nineteen years old," I said.

"Yeah, it is, but maybe Denny didn't take it that way. You used to just say whatever you thought, right? You had some art bullshit about how everyone should open up and say all their shit, right?"

"Something like that. Speaking helps us create."

"It's a good idea but it got you in a lot of trouble. Few people are ready for that. You say something they don't like and they will start to hate you. Doesn't even matter if they understood you. Denny's a piece of shit, do you know that? He's a pussy and a little shit. We all hate that type of guy, but what the fuck do we do with him? He's one of us. We have to stick with him. Personally, I hate the little fucker. People like that cause so much harm… way more harm than good. He got you fucked up, and then other people found out and now we are getting fucked up."

"But what about before then? There was stuff happening way before I met Denny."

"Denny made it worse. He's a very Jewish looking guy, right? There's some people that think we have to protect that type. People like me, fuck that. I can take care of myself. I don't need any of that sneaky bullshit."

"I never did a thing to Denny. And I don't even think I ever said anything that special to him."

"Honestly, we don't know what happened, but looks like he got you moved to a different list. Remember his girlfriend, the one he met when you used to hang out?"

"Yes, I do."

"Did you know that she dumped him because of how he treated you? You went over there one day a couple years later, right? You wanted to be friends with that little shit again, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"You couldn't understand what was with him, right? He was being a jerk…"

"Yeah, that's right. He was pretty rude. Sort of cold."

"His girlfriend dumped him over that. She said you were so nice and he was such a shit she decided to end it. It wasn't just that… she was also starting to suspect there was more to what he was doing than just being a college student."

"You mean spying on people and getting them put on lists?"

"Yes. And maybe more than just spying. We don't think he ever did anything to you, but he probably did to other people. Look, I know you and even know some stuff about your family. I met your mother, did you know that?"

"You did? When?"

"I can't tell you that. But I have been in your house and met your mother. I can't say she's my favorite type of person, but she was nice to me. There's nothing wrong with any of you. You're just people doing your thing. That's why I am here. People think you should know this…"

"What people?"

"A lot of them are your old friends."

What a weird world. "Why don't they come talk to me?" I asked.

"People think you haven't dealt with your anger yet."

"I don't feel angry."

"Exactly. You haven't even begun to deal with it… Look, I mean this… will you forgive me? I mean it. I believe people have to ask for forgiveness. Come right out and ask for it. So, I'm asking you, will you forgive me?"

"But you haven't done anything to me."

"Not like Denny and others, but I could have been better. I could have helped you and I didn't. When I think about how I saw you years ago… I thought you were an ass but I didn't know what had happened to you. Now, I think you're a fucking hero. I really do.

"Please, I mean it, forgive me if you can."

"Sure, I forgive you. It's over now."

I was surprised to see a look of real relief come over him.

"I don't deserve it," he said. "You would probably forgive anybody. But most of us don't deserve it. Do you know people have committed suicide partly because of what they did to you? They did other shit, too, and then they realized what they had done. One guy is famous, he's a writer, you know his name and have read his books—he killed himself because he said he was worse than anything he had ever seen or experienced. He was reacting to a story of suffering while bringing about the real thing to people who never did him any harm. I do admire him for killing himself, in a way. He put a plastic bag over his head and that was it. What a fucking way to go. It kills me. We fucked up so much with you… You wrote about plastic bags once, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What did you call them?"

"Sly deities."

"You got that one," he said significantly.

"Why are you telling me this? Why are you the one telling me? Why not the others?"

"I saw your poem in your mother's house… the one you had written on the wall in the basement bathroom. Did you know your mom had it painted over? What kind of mother is that? You write a beautiful poem on a filthy old wall in the basement bathroom no one uses and she bothers to get someone to paint over it. No Jewish mother would ever do that, I guarantee it."

"So, you did go there. When? You must have been there if you saw that."

"I can't tell you."

"Do you know if anyone broke in way back when I was a kid…?" I was hoping he would know about the time I thought bacon grease was orange juice and my mom spent a couple hours locked in her bathroom upstairs.

"I don't know anything about that. Some people say it's all your karma. Some say you have the worst karma of anyone, but some people think maybe you have the best." He seemed to be trying to read my expression as he spoke, to see if I were buying the karma line. He surely knew that I had studied that sort of thing.

"How do you figure it's the best?" I asked.

"I don't know that much about stuff like that. But I'll tell you one thing a lot of people respect you because, at the very least, you have been a scapegoat. We really respect scapegoats."

"A scapegoat…" I repeated despondently.

"Yeah, if you were on that list one person after another is going to feel like it's OK to teach you a lesson."

"How the fuck am I supposed to learn a lesson if I don't know one is being given? And I never did anything?"

"Fuck. That's the thing. This world is so fucked up. Filled with devils. I hate it. I hate everything about it. You remember that time your mother threw a block party on Circle Road? You were a little kid then…"

If he hadn't already said so much I would have been amazed that he knew anything about it.

"Yes, I remember. We had a blast that day," I said. "No one was watching us so we got to drink beer from the open keg."

"Your mom took a big hit that day. Remember the guy who was calling the square dances?"

My mom had volunteered to host the block party for Circle Road in what was maybe June of 1961. She decided to get a square dance caller she sort of knew to play recorded music and get people to dance. It was a marvelously, wonderfully innocent fantasy that turned, almost predictably, into a complete disaster because not one person wanted to dance.

"The guy calling the dances was an asshole. He should have just stopped and mingled with the crowd," the stranger said.

Thinking back I remembered that the caller had kept trying to get people to dance, and the more he tried the more people left. He had a loudspeaker hanging from the garage that was playing square dance music while he called the steps into a microphone even though not a single person danced even once. He even criticized people for not dancing and blamed them for spoiling the afternoon. He wore an embroidered Western jacket and a cowboy hat. I was only around ten years old but was aware that things weren't going well for my mom, or the party. My memory of the day is phantasmagorical because my friend and I were drinking a fair amount of beer. Since the party was such a flop, no one was watching us and no one cared what we did. We hid in the thick rhododendron bushes in the side yard, emerging only once in a while to run around and grab more beer. Eventually my mom went into the house. I imagine she cried, but I don't actually know what her feelings were.

"She was devastated by that. The whole thing ruined her reputation with the neighbors. They were all shitty people. They could have hung around and shown some consideration… the square dance caller was a fucking shit… You have to realize how Jews feel about assholes like that. Your poor mom throws a party and those shits punish her for it. If that was a group of Jews, we would have had fun and no one would have made your mom feel miserable. There was plenty to laugh about and enjoy on that day, but those assholes had to get all proper with her and make her feel like shit. That's the same crap they've been pulling on us for fucking centuries…"

In those days, the Circle Road neighborhood had only one Jewish family that I knew of.

"You are right," I said. "I knew it was a flop, but I guess I never realized how bad it must have been for her. We got fairly drunk that afternoon and had free reign over the food." For me, the day was sheer pleasure. There was a ton of unused food and we got to eat whatever we wanted.

"You were kids, but your mom was an adult and she was trying. The whole thing actually pisses me off even today. It would have been so easy to make her feel good rather than embarrass her."

Thinking back I could remember couples coming down the driveway toward the music. Some lingered for a few minutes before leaving while others turned around without even saying hello to my mom. All because of some dope barking songs. The stranger was not wrong about the shittiness of those people, though I am not willing to generalize about twenty centuries from that occasion.

The stranger told me he knew about what had happened at Wosta Academy.

"You didn't even realize those people were Jews, did you? What you probably don't understand is we don't recognize those people either. To us, they are barely Jewish at all. Bunch of dumbshits, little whiners, no one respects them, but we have to accept them, too. They are one of us. Lots of bad shit comes from that, but does your group accept you? You don't even have a fucking group. You're a sitting duck in this world being like that. Anyone wants to fuck your kids or do an experiment on you is good to go because you and your family have no connections. No one will care even if they do notice, which they won't. Your old roommate at Wosta when you were a senior is a piece of shit and anyone can see why you didn't like him, but we Jews accept even people like that. We use what we have and don't throw people away like you fucking stupid goys do."

He was not referring to my first roommate, Joe who got kicked out.

Then he smiled and asked me, "Do you know what *goy* means?"

"Someone who is not Jewish," I said.

"Right," he said. "But beyond that, where does the word come from?" He smiled as he asked and affirmed by his expression that I had figured something out without knowing the etymology of the word *goy*.

"You know you said that Jews are treating everyone else like they are a herd and we are the shepherds or cowboys?" I had said something like that once or twice and by this time was long past being amazed that he knew it.

"Yes, I replied."

"*Goy* means 'cattle.' It's an insult. Don't use that word on yourself." He was still smiling.

"You were pretty clever to figure that out. We give you credit for that. You were just a young guy and you are definitely not one of the herd. To us, it is massively obvious that we are a distinct group, but to someone like your sister, she didn't ever realize anything. Most of the students who went to Scarsvale schools when you did never even realized what we were, what we are."

He looked at me significantly, with a pained expression on his face. "We are a cult. Jews are the world's oldest cult. Let me ask you this, what would you do if you were one of us? Serious question: What would you do?"

He fell silent and waited while I gave his question some thought.

"I bet I would be the same as you. How do you give that up? It's a strong community and the money and power are fantastic. I doubt I would be any different from anyone else."

"See, that's where people respect you. We fucked you up very badly and you have a million reasons to hate us, but you can still say that.

"Do you think Jews are ugly?"

"Oh, hell no."

"See what I mean? You were in love with six or seven of the Jewish girls in Scarsvale. How can we blame you for that? The problem is if you ever had hooked up for the long-term, you might start to hate us. We don't have a good way to deal with people like that. Remember Barbara's dad? How he just sat in that room and never came out?"

"Yes, I do."

"He's not Jewish and he came to hate us to the point of near madness. But what can we do? If we let him into the inside, we are finished. It's the most fucked up problem. But let me tell you, you can say anything you want now. No one cares. You have every reason in the world to hate us. What I wish is that we had listened to you way back when you were in high school. Instead of being little shits about you, we should have been learning. You don't realize it, but we think a big part of why antisemitism has come roaring back is because of you. You make one little mistake… if your karma is really good… you can get fucked. That whole hate-the-Jews thing was almost gone from the world, then you got investigated and they figured out what had been happening and it came roaring back."

I assumed "they" meant the group behind the other mysterious stranger. One thing I wish both of those groups had appreciated in those days is how bizarre it is to have people jump out of the bushes and start telling you stuff like this only to disappear an hour later. How can one individual process this kind of information? I have never told anyone about any of it until now because I know that I will be treated as a nut, and no one will want to spend the time listening to the whole thing. I might have tried to talk to my sister, Mira, but both strangers had intimated that she should not be trusted. The first one implied that while the second one came right out and said it.

"Don't go near her," the second one said. "Stay away from her. She is stabbing you in the back every chance she gets. You got sucked into her thing years ago in New Hampshire and wasted a lot of time."

He said more things about my sister, but I don't know what to think about his words even today. Having someone tell you that your sister is stabbing you in the back is like having someone tell you that your spouse is cheating on you. If you believe in the person being accused, it seems incomprehensible. My sister had no reason to be harming me that I knew of, so I wondered, and still wonder, if the stranger was trying to manipulate me. After we moved back to Circle Road, I tried on several occasions to engage my sister in a conversation that would allow me to ask her about what the stranger had said, but she was always very reluctant to talk about the past or to broach personal subjects. Is that confirmation of the stranger's words or just a complex coincidence? I honestly do not know. Furthermore, this whole line of reasoning leads me to wonder if someone is manipulating *her*.

See what I mean it is not easy to process these massive amounts of information that appear out of the blue? If you accept the information at face value, it means groups of people have been following you, filming you, recording you, speaking with everyone you ever knew, lying about you to those people to gain more information, drugging you and worse. Then why should it stop there? Why might they not be manipulating me now? And if people have been following me and trying to teach me a lesson for no reason I can think of, why should my sister not be having similar problems?

On the other hand, if you don't accept what the strangers say—and remember they told you face-to-face and cited scores of impossible-to-know facts—then you have to accept that you are crazy, hallucinating the entire thing.

If any reader wants to believe I am hallucinating all this, I don't blame you. Then, read this story as being about a crazy guy who is trying to make sense of his own madness. It's still a good story. I guarantee you, though, that there are many readers who will know this is a true story because it is true.

"You liked the Jewish girls in Scarsvale and thought they were gorgeous, right?"

"Right."

"Fuck, that may have been the whole thing right there… Back in those days it was even harder to accept… we don't like people messing with our women.

"Anyway, what about the guys? Do you think Jewish guys are ugly?"

"Definitely not. Some are, no question. But a lot of them are very good looking."

"See, there you are. You see them as people. They're not devils to you."

"Of course not."

"Those fucking stupid assholes. How come *they* couldn't figure this out? Who did you used to listen to at Wosta? Who were some of your favorite groups?"

"I listened to tons of Dylan, Cream, Hendrix, Simon and Garfunkel, Four Tops…"

"Those fucking asshole. They can't even hear? Dylan was your main comfort in those days when you were feeling like shit, right?"

He must have known that from stuff I had said because it was true. "That's right," I replied.

Maybe Joe had told him.

"Those fucking pieces of shit… every night you're listening to Simon and Garfunkel and Bob Dylan and they are thinking you hate Jews… what a bunch of fucking assholes. Caused us more trouble than you will ever know."

"Caused me some trouble, too," I said.

"I know. We blew it. Believe me you're safe now."

He said those words but I do not feel entirely safe to this day, though I am more confident that things have passed. What scares me is I don't think there is just one group or that the strongest groups can completely control the others. My sense is that all large groups end up being controlled by psychopaths, and all large groups use psychopaths in many capacities. Denny Dink would never make anyone feel suspicious. He was a friendly person with whom I shared many interests. I liked him tremendously. There was no way for me to know that he was a shithead. How can you tell if someone is a genuine friend or capable of the madness of Dink? It's very difficult, more difficult than it may seem to many readers. I was not then and I am not now sure that the stranger knew how hard it is to control people like Dink or even if he was fully aware of them and how they operate within the Jewish community.

"And stop worrying about money," he said. "You will never run out of money. Don't worry about that. People hate seeing you waste so much time worrying about money."

That comment did help for a few years. But as time went on, I started wondering where's the money? I never went completely broke, but never had much. My professional skills don't pay much and I am not good at hustling. *They* demand reparations. Why do I have to sing for my supper and how can I do that if my music has been taken from me by an intracranial tattoo?

On that day when I spoke with the second mysterious stranger, I did not understand that my getting on that cursed list could very well have been connected to Peter Citron. My nearly getting run over by a speeding car around the time of his arrest could also have been connected to Peter Citron. Even my devastating eye operation may have been connected to Peter Citron. I wonder now was Rathbone connected to Peter Citron? Some of the teachers at school?

Those questions are not far-fetched. Peter Citron was eventually not brought to trial in New York due to lack of evidence. Apparently Kelly's testimony alone would not have been enough to convict him. My parents had raised the subject with me and from my (probably very naive) response decided to keep me out of the case. I could have fully corroborated any part of Kelly's story that involved me. The zinger in this is that when Peter Citron left Scarsvale after charges against him were dropped, he eventually went to Omaha, Nebraska to work for the *Omaha World Herald* newspaper. What's significant about that is that Peter Citron then became a central—or near central—figure in the Franklin cover-up sex scandal that

surfaced in the early 1990s. An accused child sex-offender gets let go in Scarsvale and winds up in Omaha to work for a newspaper that is near the center of one of this nation's largest (publicly exposed) child sex scandals. If Citron's connections extended to Omaha and San Francisco, which is another piece of his sad biography, did they also extend to Wosta and Madison?

Once I learned about Citron's part in the Franklin case, a lot of stuff became clear, or seemed to become clear, even though it is still pretty murky. In metaphysics, we don't know if we are living in the aftermath of the Big Bang, in a conscious universe, in a multiverse, in a simulated one, in one observed by God. We just don't know these things, not with certainty. In like manner, beyond the very few details that surround our lives, we don't really know what sort of a society we are living in, what some of our friends are really doing, what even our own siblings think. I can't prove that Citron was part of a secret sex-predator society, and I can't prove that elements of that society brought him from Scarsvale to Omaha to work as a gossip columnist, and I can't prove that his troubles in Scarsvale were actually *good* credentials for that group because he would not be likely to squeal. In fact I can't even prove that there was a Franklin sex-scandal group because most all of them got off without charges or were convicted as individuals who had no knowledge of each other. I can't prove a lot of things, but I have to wonder about them, just as I have to wonder if there are moral laws at the heart of our existence or nothing at all.

If you doubt what I have been saying about the Franklin scandal and Citron's role in it, please look it up. There are videos on YouTube and several good books have been written about it.

The stranger told me that some of my old friends started researching my past when they found me on that cursed list.

"They were all surprised, and maybe not so surprised. We all still wonder how it is that we weren't able to teach you more about us.

"You liked all those people… but there were others."

"Who?" I asked.

"I don't know. But what happened is they eventually contacted Gold. You remember her? The class you were in was an experiment. Everybody was Jewish except you. And you were all kept together for two years. You were in the class in seventh and eighth grades, right?"

"Yes, I was."

"When did Mountebank give you that operation?"

"Just before school started in the eighth grade."

"That's it. Mountebank did not know that you would have the same teacher again. If you had been in a normal class, you would have gotten a new teacher and no one would have noticed anything. Your stupid fucking parents didn't even notice…"

"I think they did…" At that point, my mom had not yet started her sessions with her friends and I had not yet received her apologies for those events, but I believed at that time that she must have known.

"Maybe. But the point is they didn't *do* anything about it."

"That's right."

"Gold should have done something. That's our fucked up thing. No Jew wants to say or do anything about other Jews. It's a fucking law and I think it is going to destroy us one of these days…" He paused to look at the sky and then continued, "You don't even have a group. And even if you did, all you guys ever do is fucking fight all the time. It is so mellow to be with Jews. To tell you the truth, I can't stand you guys. All you do is fight or talk like little kids. Complete fucking idiots, sorry to say."

"I can't really disagree with you. It does suck and there is a ton of fighting and shittiness. But you are fine because you figured out how to exploit everyone else."

"It's true. We can do almost anything. It's free money because we know how to work the system. Capitalism is wonderful for Jews. We were made for this system. We control *everything*. I don't know if we are going to be able to hold onto it, but right now we control *everything*."

"But that's not how the system is supposed to work. You are supposed to pursue 'enlightened self-interest', not simply self-interest."

"Fuck that. And why do you even care? America is nothing. It's just a place to make money. You are wasting your time giving a flying fuck about anything but yourself. It's a nation of devils. You stole it from the Indians and we are stealing it from you. So, fuck you."

His words didn't bother me that much. I appreciated the honesty. Since I hadn't made the connection with Citron at that point, I asked him what started it all.

"Did it have something to do with my mom's fiancé in Wosta?"

He didn't seem to know that story, so I told him about how Fishburn, whom I called *Fishbrains*, which is how I think of him, had dumped my mom with the flippant note. He was surprised to learn that story.

"No one has told me about that," he said. "See, this is where *we* are fucked up as bad as you guys." He kept emphasizing a strong difference between Jews and "you guys."

"We can't even research that? That would have been so fucking simple. There are Jews everywhere. All you have to do is call one and he will know someone who will put you in touch with someone else who knows the story. I'm gonna check that story out. If it's true, then we are fucking stupider than you…"

"It's true. My mom would never lie about something like that, and she could never have faked those emotions."

"And quit calling him Fishbrains, will you? We don't like guys making fun of our names."

The subject was my mom and this comment made me angry. "Well, I don't like guys fucking around with my mom," I said heatedly.

"Alright, alright… If that had anything to do with it. If it was about your mom or dad, that is completely fucked up. It's a big mistake to take fights into the next generation. Fix things in your own generation and don't involve the kids. Anyone with brains knows that, but what you ran into was a bunch of idiots with no brains. This shit has come back to haunt us really bad. We think people are doing it to us, now, too."

I have to admit that at this point I said simply, "Good!"

Then I added, "It's the only language you understand…"

I was still mad at him about the Fishbrains comment and spoke too strongly.

He didn't seem all that bothered by me but by what might be happening to his people.

"They got to Dylan, we're pretty sure. You still think that's good?"

"No, I don't. I don't think it's good. I just got mad."

"Yeah, I know. It's a fucked up world. Here's where you make mistakes with Jews. With us, you can think whatever the fuck you want, but you cannot *say* it. If you say it, it's really bad. That's not how you think, right?"

"No, I think we should all say whatever we want. Talk it out. Words are no big deal. They are a very long way from actions."

"For you, maybe that's true. But it's not true for most people. Most Jews think you guys are all a bunch of fucking psychopaths. We don't give a fuck if we totally wipe you out."

"How can you wipe us out?"

He looked at me with a mix of knowing derision, sadness, and wonder. "We can… But I don't know… maybe it's a mistake… we have the leverage and no one else does… but do we really want to wipe you guys out? We know how to deal with you… we figured you out. But with new people, I don't know…if we can…

"You know you look like a typical fucking Lithuanian. For centuries Jews have been watching guys like you. Big guys with muscles, living on crappy little farms, acting happy as pigs in shit. And we always wondered, do these guys have any brains at all? Big lunky fuckers too lazy to do anything. So people watched you, and we found you are smart. You wrote a book about us. You understood things at a young age—that takes a shitload of brains to see that. You knew what was going on. But you are still a lazy fuck. That, or Mountebank totally cleaned your clock. People like you are complete as you are. You seek nothing, want nothing. No Jews are allowed to be like that. Some of us would like to live like you, not giving a fuck about anything, but we *can't*. Our whole thing is you have to do something."

"I tried. But every time I did, some shit happened."

"That's probably us, too. Fucking shit. Anyway, I *am* sorry about it. I hate this fucking world. You're safe now and you don't have to worry about that shit anymore."

I'm not so sure about that because more shit happened in San Diego years later, but that may have been a stray dog, I don't know.

"Remember that cop that stopped you in Scarsvale village?" he asked, changing the subject or rambling ahead with what he wanted to say.

"Yes, I do."

"He was Jewish. He's a Jewish cop. You were walking with two Jewish girls and he stopped you for some bullshit to scare you and drive them away from you."

I had vaguely suspected that, but now I was sure. The stranger would not have said that if it weren't the case. That incident happened late one warm afternoon in spring. I was talking with two girls, one of whom I had a major crush on. I had been to her home once and had been to the other girl's house few weeks earlier. The cop approached the three of us as we were walking on a sidewalk across the street from the entrance to the train station.

"Keep moving," he said to the girls as he stood in front of me to prevent me from going with them. "Just get out of here," he said again to the girls. "You don't belong with him." His voice was demanding, authoritative. He was a short man, but intimidating.

"We have a report that you went into the garage under the office building on Overhill. What were you stealing?"

I said I had not gone into that garage and had stolen nothing.

"We think you did," he said. I saw my friends down the sidewalk turn and look back and then continue walking away.

"I haven't even been there today," I said.

"The description fits you perfectly. Do you want me to take you to the station for questioning or do you want to tell me now?"

He seemed to be enjoying himself, taking pleasure in frightening me. As the afternoon turned into a disaster, I looked back down the sidewalk to see if I could still see my friends. Instead, I saw my father coming out of a barber shop that was a few storefronts down from where I was standing with the cop.

"Dad…" I called weakly at the same time he saw me. As he turned and walked toward us, I kept my eyes on him. He came up beside me in just a few seconds as the barber shop was only about fifteen yards away. By the time he got to me, the cop had disappeared. I had not seen him leave and didn't care where he had gone. The moment became surreal as I was stressed from being confronted by the cop and astonished that my father had appeared almost out of nowhere. It was rare for him to be in the village at that hour, probably around four o'clock, and very unusual for him to use that barbershop. His dark hair was freshly cut and smoothed back.

"What was that all about?" he asked, his face displaying deep concern.

My mind raced to understand what had happened and how I might defend myself. "He said I stole something from the Overhill garage, but I haven't even been near that garage in days."

"Well, he's gone now."

"Why did he leave?" It didn't make sense to me that the cop would leave just because my father was coming. If he thought I had committed a crime, wouldn't he stay to tell my father?

"He may have wanted… What were you doing?"

"Just talking with some friends."

"Maybe he didn't want you to be talking with them."

His words made no sense to me that day, but do now. As we walked home, I went on at length about how I was innocent and hadn't even been near the garage. My dad said, "It's important in this world not only to be not guilty but also to *look* like you are not guilty. You have to maintain the *appearance* of not being guilty."

"You know something?" the stranger said. "Years later that same cop arrested the father of one of those girls. We're pretty sure it was the father that got the cop to bother you and scare the girls…"

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Yes, and it gets stranger. He was arrested about twenty years later while you were living in the woods in New Hampshire. He lost his case and had to get rid of everything. Remember those shirts your mom sent you while you were in your cabin… the ones that smelled of BO?"

"Yes."

"We're pretty sure those were his shirts. You didn't like them did you?"

"No, they were terrible shirts with raised patterns and stank of BO."

"What did you do with them," he asked, more to get my confirmation than to find out something he didn't know.

"I threw them in the fire and burned them."

"He donated those shirts along with a lot of other things to your church bazaar and your mom bought them and sent them to you."

That made sense because my mom always bought stuff at the church bazaar and sometimes sent some of it to me.

As I recalled the shirts, which had actually revolted me, and my abrupt act of shoving them into my wood stove, I also remembered his house and the evening I had spent there years before with his daughter and some of her friends. I don't know how to treat the memory of Lila, the girl I spent all my time with that night. She was not Jewish. We both were overwhelmingly attracted to each other and showed it in many ways. But I was extremely immature and had no idea how to follow up after that night. One result of intracranial tattoos is they make the recipient childish. I felt like I was about four years old for years after. Only gradually did my behavioral and cognitive age rise to approach my chronological age. In the months after the night I spent with Lila, I had no idea what to do. I wanted to call her, but it was very hard for me to use the phone in our house. To use it, I had to leave the dinner table early and go to my parents bedroom to make the call, and I could rarely pull that off because Mira almost always followed me upstairs and taunted me at the door of the bedroom.

She brought that up with me one day many years later and asked me, "Why did you like me so much when I did stuff like that to you?"

I answered, "I don't think you meant any real harm."

"But I did," she replied regretfully. "I knew exactly what I was doing. Why did I do stuff like that? I wish I had been one of those kids who is nice to everyone and who everyone respects…"

I didn't feel mad about it even when she said that. How do you blame a teenager for doing something like that? And how do you blame an adult for confessing it years later?

I can still remember sitting on the floor in my parents' bedroom—in the same spot where decades later my demented mom would try to stand to go to a train station that existed only in her dreaming mind—dialing the phone to call Lila. But my calls never went through to her and others because Mira would be coming up the stairs to stand in the doorway.

I was weak and stupid in those days, completely incapable of asserting anything. It occurs to me now that my weakness was one reason my parents sent me to Wosta Academy. Another reason may have been the incident with the cop. Still another was my placid deference to whatever my parents decided. Yet another was masturbation. Like all young people I did it. Unlike most adults, my parents did not know that it was normal.

My mom even brought this subject up in the Chinese restaurant one day. She alluded to it obliquely and then said in an anguished, astonished tone, "And now I find out it's *normal*… Oh, your father. I brought that up with him too many times. I think I used it to be close to him… but I was pushing him away from you…"

She was about eighty years old at the time and had only learned recently that masturbation was normal. I don't know what to say about my father. I can't believe there is any man in the world with a working member that has never masturbated. The damn thing has a mind of its own and no man can deny it.

The reason my mom knew about it was I was sort of a dumb prude. It seemed obscene to me to stand naked or pull the thing out of my pants. If I hid the act inside my pants, it felt dreamy and pleasant and not obscene at all. The result of this ignorant sensibility was I kept ejaculating in my underwear and my mom saw them. In a million years I would never have thought that she would examine my underwear. I assumed she just threw my shorts into the wash along with everything else, but she did examine them and she did apparently "discuss" the subject with my father, whose role in this I will never comprehend. What could they have been saying? I wonder if she showed my shorts to my dad and how in the world he could react in any other way than with a hearty laugh at my mom and me.

One day around that time, he came up to my bedroom, a very rare event. It was late afternoon and I was sitting on my bed reading. I heard his heavy steps start up the stairs to the third floor, where I was. It filled me with dread to hear his lugubrious pace as he mounted one stair after another. Since he almost never came into my bedroom, I feared something terrible was happening, which in a way it was.

He came in and sat on a chair facing me. Then he told me a weird story about how when he was in the navy, he could see "some of the more discouraged men playing with themselves in the open toilet stalls." Like I said, I was a dumb prude. Not only did I not understand why he was telling me that story but I was too embarrassed to ask him or to respond in any way. By that time in my life, my father rarely spoke to me and never at length. It seemed odd to hear his voice go on for more than a sentence or two. And it was even odder to imagine open toilet stalls with "discouraged men" going at it. Were they facing in or out, I wondered. If in, how did he know what they were doing? But they couldn't have been facing out, could they?

After a while, he rose from the chair and went back downstairs. As I remained sitting on my bed where I had been the whole time, I felt relieved that I was not being punished for anything, but puzzled about why he had come to tell me that story. I did not connect it with my own behavior in any way.

Oddly enough some good came of his story because the weirdness in my mind concerning it blended with a Jules Verne book my father had given me and which I was reading at the time. I couldn't quite follow the book and I couldn't understand my father or his story at all, so I just sat there in a pool of mystery mixed with relief as I listened to him descend all the way to the first floor, maybe to report to my mom about what had happened.

Both of my parents had very poor understanding of the human body and its functions, which can be seen in this masturbation issue, in their not comprehending the gravity of my intracranial tattoo, and in my mom's failure to understand how the human head grows and develops, to say nothing of the psychology that resides within it. More on that later.

I do blame Jews for a good deal of what has happened to me. Their culture allows sociopaths to prosper and encourages them to harm non-Jews. I am sure many are unaware of what is being done, but I also believe that many are willfully unaware in the same way that people and cultures always find ways to be unaware of their faults. And, of course, many are fully aware.

As I say that, though, I can also say that my parents and my family and my people, whoever they are if they are, are deeply unaware themselves. My own mother seized control of my life and "guided" me through one harmful and alienating experience after another. My father either looked on dispassionately or participated. Their church and social relations did nothing to help. Their ignorance was as much a product of their world as it was of their minds.

And the same is true for all of us for all of us are raised into cultures which entrap us.

The second mysterious stranger asked me about eighth grade, the immediate aftermath of my tattoo. Among other things, I told him about sitting in the bathtub in my parents' bathroom, deciding to give up on trying to do anything as the warm water swirled around me.

"That's just what they wanted," he said.

It had never occurred to me that that deeply personal incident—accepting profound failure—in my mother's bathtub had been something someone else had wanted.

"We don't kill many people anymore," he said, gazing upon me as one who had been spared. "It causes bad vibes. But we do fuck 'em up because we want people who hate Jews to look like losers. They become advertisements for a dead end."

"But I don't hate Jews," I said, knowing it was pointless to say while also resenting my sense of needing to say that, needing to protest against their absurd and groundless vigilantism.

"I don't think you hate us. Like I said, it's a problem we have. If people get too close, they get hurt. You *do* know something about us… You heard kids in Scarsvale say 'ain't it great to be Jewish' all the time, right?"

"Yes, I did."

"You know why? It's because they thought you were Jewish. They don't say that to other people. Thing was, it used to feel very sad to be Jewish. The whole people were depressed, so they came up with stuff like 'ain't it great to be Jewish' to cheer everybody up.

"There's lots of Jews like you, with your kind of background. Your mom really could have passed as a Jew if she'd married that guy. And if she had passed you could have, too. It's too late to do that now. We know everything about everyone going back three, four generations. No one can fake their way in anymore, but some people like you or your mom did. When you were in Gold's class, you were the only non-Jew. Did you know that?"

"Sort of," I said. I was sort of aware but did not understand that Jews were so deeply separated from others, thought of themselves as being so different.

"One thing we learned from you being in that class is being Jewish is not genetic, the consciousness isn't. Because you were as Jewish as us in those years. You do think like us in many ways even today… so, how does it feel to you? What do you think of Jewish consciousness?"

He looked confident but also defensive, ready for anything.

"It's very aggressive," I said almost immediately.

He winced, knowing it's true.

Then after a short pause, I added, "It's also fun and funny. I had a lot of fun in seventh grade. In eighth grade, I was a zombie…"

"They kept fucking with you after that in high school. I don't know what to say. I can't understand it. Why don't we just do our own thing in one place and leave other people alone? The time is going to come one day when people see what we are doing and then they will look back and claim we have always been like that… that everything that happened in history is our own fault… you figured us out without any help… you could see… there must be many more like you…" He cast his face toward the sky in anxious wonder.

"Remember your math teacher in ninth grade? That whole class was Jewish, too, like Gold's. Every time you missed school, he laid on a lot of new material that was not in the book, just to fuck you up. Some other teachers did that, too. In those days, they didn't realize that we would get so much power so fast. That was the 1960s and Jews were still struggling…"

As an aside, I want to say that I hate this subject. I hate having to deal with it and I hate having to be the one to tell this tale. It's an important tale and it should be known, but I hate having to tell it, having to think about it so much. I have avoided this story and avoided studying its historical background for years because it's depressing. It's very unpleasant for me to remember cruel faces and the forces behind them, the thinking behind them, the smiles that concealed so much. Grandmas with vials of poison, intracranial tattoos, Citron, legions of shitheads following me around with more vials of poison, so many psychopathic faces, false friends, set-ups, let-downs, and years of delusion and depression because those vials really do contain poison and it really does cause harm. It's so sad. The Jewish story of their history as it is commonly given is false. They did many bad things themselves. They are not and were not innocent. History is gruesome almost wherever you look. A dance of many devils, including Jews.

"Don't hate that math teacher," the stranger said. "He's suffered enough."

Then he looked at me and said, "You could be part of that group, you know. You can't be on the inside, but you can be in that group. Have kids, let the kids blend in. It's the most powerful group in the history of the world. There's money, friends, and knowing your kids will have a great life…"

This caught me by surprise and left me not knowing what to say. How was I supposed to be part of that group, I wondered? The stranger did not say. We fell silent. This juncture in our conversation has always perplexed me because it didn't fit with the other things he had said. In retrospect, I think it probably was part of a message he was supposed to deliver to me but that he didn't want to deliver. Or could not, or thought he had when he hadn't. There is a lot of meaning in what he said, but his words weren't complete or connected with anything else. It was like a hallucination in the sky that appears and disappears.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Two things I want to be clear about are this story is not about victimization and I am deeply appreciative of all those who made the effort to explain and, where appropriate, apologize to me. This includes my mom, the mysterious strangers, and those who were behind any or all of them.

As mentioned, I think it is likely that people in the know were behind the sessions my mom had with her friends and that their information allowed her friends to guide at least some of my mom's conclusions. I am not sure of this, but believe it is probably the case and so I want to express my gratitude to them. Even if no one was behind those sessions, I will be eternally grateful to the women who did them with my mom because, whatever the case, she benefited greatly from them as did I.

I know that the second mysterious stranger was sent by people who knew me long ago because he told me. I don't know exactly who those people are and though I wish they had spoken to me themselves or given me more information and other options, I am still deeply grateful for their having done what they did. It has been a great relief to better understand what happened and to know that others know the story and see it more or less in the way I see it. Among those people or connected to them, one in particular stands out in my mind. There may have been others, even many others, but this person stands out because she actually stood in front of me during one of my more insane moments and tried to stop me and talk to me.

I cannot overstate the deep appreciation I feel for her act and toward her. It took moral and personal courage as well as compassion for her to do that. Those moments in the bright California sun remain in my mind as if they happened yesterday. What may be hard for readers to understand is only one part of my brain recognized her—and there is no question I recognized her—while the other parts of my brain soared even deeper into my personal limbo. I could not stop because only part of me was there and the walking disappointer of others was moving my legs.

I have thought about those moments many times in the years since and only now, decades later, do I see them more or less for what they were. The deepest parts of life are non-temporal and for this reason we cannot ever fully organize emotional and existential states. They move and connect in ways that surpass understanding. She really tried when she stood there. You cannot do better than that on this earth.

The French saying *when I excuse myself, I accuse myself* may be good for politicians but for real people it is nonsense. When you excuse yourself—apologize or express remorse—you are not accusing yourself, you are helping others and advancing the network of mutual comprehension that is one of the only good thing we humans have. To someone in my position it brings immense relief just to know what happened and at least one version of why.

There were people behind the first mysterious stranger, too. People who had known me years before. I want to express my gratitude to them as well. These were the people who said I was "one of them," which I take to be an honor. As with the second mysterious stranger, I wish the message had been

clearer and that someone who had actually known me had delivered it. But gratitude should not be qualified, or at least not too much. In the next section I will describe a third mysterious stranger who seems also to have been backed by those same people, many of whom were Irish-Americans. I have noticed that Irish, Jews, and Sicilians all are marginal peoples who have formed tight-knit gangs. Lithuanians are also marginal people, but I know of no Lithuanian gangs in the US. Of course, I am not really Lithuanian as I have never been there, do not know the language, and don't know any of the people except family members and some of my grandma's neighbors. I shouldn't speak for them at all, but maybe I can in the sense that I am an example of a marginal person that has no connection even to "my" marginal group. Lithuanians are all but destroyed and so am I. In this, I am a normal person in much of world history. Groups come and go, much like individuals.

Chapter Thirty

The third mysterious stranger was disdainful, even contemptuous, toward me as we spoke in a cabin in the hills of Southern California. He repeatedly called me stupid and glared at me as if I had harmed him personally. He seemed almost offended by what I said. I wanted the information he had so I endured his insults and mockery as best I could. I can't explain his behavior but my guess is either he was using a tough-guy interrogation technique to shake all the information he could out of me or he was basing his attack on information about me that is probably false. He may have studied a bad intelligence profile of my "personality" or been coached in how to deal with "people like me."

"The thing with you is you're stupid," he said. "You don't understand how things hook up, how it's all connected."

The cabin was at the end of a dirt road. It did not appear that anyone lived in it but it did seem to get some use. The wood floor and counter top were free of dust and the water faucet worked. There were a couple of wooden chairs but we stood. Sun shone on the dirt and live oak trees visible through the windows.

"Let me ask you, would you rather be a vic or a perp?"

I hesitated, not knowing what to say.

"I mean, would you rather be the one who is harmed or the one who does the harming? In this world there are very few other options. Maybe what you did, writing a book is one of the few. But nobody respects that shit. Remember the Beatles' *Paperback Writer*? Who the fuck wants to do something like that? Most guys hate writing more than anything else…"

"I'm not sure I like it either," I said.

He glared at me and returned to his original question. "Would you rather be a vic or a perp?"

"I would rather be the vic," I said.

"Fucking idiot. That's what you got. Look, there is this world and that's all there is. Your ideas have no bearing on it… Strength and prevailing are all that matter…"

His eyes swept the floor. Then he continued.

"Remember Madison when you were in college? Who else do you remember from then? Did any other weird stuff happen to the people you knew?"

I told him the names of a few people. One was a normal active guy who was a member of the small group I hung out with. He started using heroin and within a few weeks had dropped out of school and disappeared. No one knew what happened to him, but we heard he had died. Another guy had a gorgeous girlfriend. I hung out with them a few times until one day they started acting completely crazy. Before long, they disappeared, too.

"Both Irish guys," he said. "We think they were going for the Irish kids. They thought you were one too." His eyes remained angry but became distant, more thoughtful.

"Anyone ever say the word *amalek* to you?"

"Yeah, someone did once."

"What did he say?"

"He just said, 'You are *amalek*.' I was at a party and he came up to me and just said that. Then he smiled. He leaned toward me when he spoke."

"That's them. Do you know what that word means?"

"No idea."

"It's the name of a tribe that was destroyed by the Jews in the Bible. They were wiped out and all trace of them obliterated."

I felt terrified hearing that. Twenty years later in a cabin in California what I had thought was a stray word in Madison, Wisconsin took on terrible meaning, knitting memories and events into a dark pattern with terrible implications.

The way that single word reached back into my past made me realize how much of my life had been false, manipulated by fanatics who enjoyed taunting me and smiling at me as they worked their schemes. Everything was beyond my control. A disdainful stranger could change my interpretation of my whole life by explaining a single word I had heard years before. Maybe he disdained me because he knew my position in all its abject glory. It does happen that people can think that way. Once you're down, it's like you deserve being kicked.

"Look, I know more about you than you do. Do you know that your head is deformed?" He glared at me again, almost accusingly.

"It doesn't seem deformed to me."

"It is. We've measured it. But you have no idea why, do you?"

At the time, I did not. But years later, my mom explained it to me when we were having one of our longs talks. I think that for her, this was the most difficult subject she raised with me.

"I don't know why I did it," she said, rising slightly in her seat and leaning toward me from across the table. I just wanted the best… I didn't want to hurt you… I don't know what I was thinking. I can't understand it. I must have been crazy. I did it to Mira, to you, and then I did it to *Pep!*" Her voice climbed in horror as she said *Pep*. You were all fine when you were children, but now that you are grown… people can't accept it. They can't accept how you look."

"Mom, what are you talking about?"

"Tommy, when you were very small, I… I… pushed on your heads… to make them narrower."

When she said that, I remembered a day when I was very young. I was in the living room napping and my mom put a pillow over the side of my head and leaned on it. I did not feel afraid as I tried to understand what she was doing. I was very small at the time. As she pressed, I remember wondering what did she want me to do? Then somehow it occurred to me that she wanted "me" to be on the other side of my skull. This made sense to me and so I moved "me" to the other side of my head, thinking I was doing what my mom wanted.

I told my mom that I remembered her doing that.

"I believe you," she said. "You were very small but you do seem to remember things from back then. You slept for a very long time after that and I was worried about you, wondering if I had hurt you… But then you got up and crawled around…"

I can still remember that. I crawled into the kitchen and my mom asked me several times, "Tommy, are you all right?" I remember feeling quite good, though different from usual as "I" was on the other side of my head now.

"Why did you do that?" I asked her.

"I didn't want your heads to be too wide… It's terrible, Tommy, and I feel terrible about it. It ruined your relations with your father… and I could never tell him about it because he would have killed me. I think he really would have killed me. You see, he was very proud of his large wide head.. and I was trying to make his children… I think with you, I started to realize it was wrong, but then I did it with *Pep* too!"

I had no idea how to respond or what to feel. "You didn't push on our temples, did you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Oh my God, you could have caused bleeding."

"I think I may have caused your eye problem… If I did that…"

My mom was actually trembling and I could see that she felt worse about this than anything else she had ever said to me.

"How could I have done that? Was I insane? I didn't do it to Carol, but I did do it to Mira, you, and Pep. I can't imagine how I could have done that, how I could have kept that idea going… and I even did it to *Pep!*"

Pep was the youngest and most recent, so her strong feelings for him made sense. You can't see very much narrowing in Mira's head. You can see quite a bit in mine and even more in Pep's. My mom herself had a narrow "Nordic" head and I probably would have had one too, only it is even more narrow due to her pushing.

"I wonder if my mother did something like that to me…," my mom mused. "Where did I get the idea? I don't even know how I came up with that idea, but I did…"

"Mom," I said. "Even in the deepest, darkest, most primitive parts of the world centuries ago, I doubt anyone did that."

She looked at me with such pain and forlornness, I felt deeply sorry for her.

"You don't think so?"

"No. There are customs where people bind children's heads to reshape them over time, but who would just push on them, squash them like that?"

"I don't know. I don't know why I did it, Tommy. You all were fine when you were little, but as you grew I could see what I had done. It doesn't look right. People can't accept it, can't accept you," she said again, putting another sort of weight on me with those words.

I honestly do not know if people can't accept me because of the shape of my head.

"Maybe you didn't do all that much harm. Things just moved around… our skulls went a little higher."

"I don't know. I don't think so… You need all the brains you can get in this world… it's like a can. If you squeeze it it hold less…"

As she spoke, I remembered the times she had winced or turned away when the subject of head shapes came up. Once in the kitchen, she had risen from her chair and turned away in fright as I compared my narrow head to a friend's wide one. Once I had praised my nephew's round head as that of a poet's, while saying my narrow one was that of a troubled neurotic. My mom was with us then. She moaned quietly at my words and stared at me with profound feeling, from a profound distance. At the time, I had no idea why she looked and reacted like that. In my mind, I had simply been joking around.

In the Chinese restaurant, she continued. "You once said to me that all of you were like 'squashed bugs.' Do you remember that?"

"Yes, I do." I had said it to her in a bantering manner with a hardened edge many years before.

"Did you know then?"

"No, I did not. I just meant that we are all kind of passive and clumsy, like squashed bugs."

She winced again and shrank into herself. "I would have gone to an insane asylum if anyone had known. Your poor father… I could never tell him, never explain what I had done…" Her voice trailed off into the deep hallways of the past as she recalled my father and their relationship.

The mysterious stranger continued. "You once said Abe Lincoln would never be elected today because he's not attractive enough. Did you know his head was deformed? And he had a lazy eye like you."

"I did not know that," I said. The stranger must have known what my mom did, though at the time I did not and this, in part, may have accounted for his attitude. Not only had I had the "mother of all head injuries," as he put it referring to my tattoo, but I had also had an actual mother who had done head injuries.

"No one knows what caused Lincoln's head to be like that. Do you know what caused yours?"

"I am not aware that I have a deformed head," I said again.

He asked me more questions about my time in Madison, directing my attention to events he clearly knew about. I answered truthfully because I did and also because I wanted to know more. I didn't like how the stranger was dealing with me, but he did get all the information he wanted out of me. I didn't hold back anything.

"You are so far out of this culture," he said at one point. "It's unbelievable. They hit you when you were a kid and you got back up, then they hit you again in high school and you recovered, then again in college and you climbed back, but when they hit you in New Hampshire… I don't think you are going to be able to come back from that."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Do you remember Gilman Street in Madison?"

"Yes."

"You had to go back for one semester to finish a course you had dropped out of. Why did you do that?"

"Because the teacher kept giving me long faggy looks. I couldn't stand it."

"Did you tell anyone why?"

"No."

"Because you were embarrassed?"

"I guess. What am I supposed to say and who would I have told?"

"They thought you dropped out because the work was too hard. That was one of your Chinese classes, right?"

"Yeah, classical Chinese."

"If that hadn't happened you never would have had to go back for that semester."

"That's right."

"Do you remember you went back to Madison and had to find a room as quickly as you could and you found one right away on Gilman Street? You thought you were lucky. What was the room like?"

"It was a nice room on the third floor of an old house. I thought I was super lucky because that was a difficult area to find a vacancy and the rent was good."

"They were holding that room for you."

That brought dread to my mind. That had never occurred to me.

"It was planned. They trapped you."

It was in the past where revisions were happening, but revisions coming from the strangers were terrifying.

"Remember that bar, *The Gaza*? Their thing was *Gaza Burgers* with a special sauce."

"Yes, I remember."

"Those people owned the building you rented a room in. Did you ever go in *The Gaza*?"

"A few times."

"Did you like it?"

"Not really. It looked good inside but never gave me a good feeling, and it was expensive."

"Those were the people."

"What people?" I asked, not knowing whom he was referring to or what else to say.

"There was another guy on the third floor with you, right?"

"Yeah, there was…"

"Describe him for me."

"He was a weird guy. He never looked me in the eye. His door was often open and I could see him sitting on his bed when I went down the hall to the bathroom we shared. I even stopped and spoke to him once or twice. He just sat there and spoke a word or two in response but never looked at me."

"That's him… They can't look you in the eye because it humanizes you."

My sense of dread about what had happened in that building years ago was growing, but I still was not able to put the pieces together. I have known periods of confusion and sadness but never ones marked by fear. Confusion and sadness feel like something you do to yourself, but fear—fear of the sort the stranger was suggesting—requires a hidden group of figures who are bent on harming you and who do harm you repeatedly. I had never deeply held that concept, that idea, so fear of that nature was not something I was used to.

"What did he look like?" the stranger asked.

"He was a small guy with long dark hair and a short beard. He always seemed to be under a cloud of anger or hatred…"

"That was for *you*."

"I don't think so. I never had any problem with him. I even invited him to smoke a joint with me one day. He had nothing with me."

"He moved out, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the girl that came into your room the day before he moved out?"

"Yes, I do. How do you know about that?"

"We canvassed Madison long after you left. Some people came forward with information and she was one of them."

I was amazed to learn that. The girl—a real Madison beauty—was a small detail from my past, a moment of pleasant excitement that went nowhere.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She said she went into your room… She wanted to tell you… to warn you…"

"She came in to warn me? Of what…?" My mind shot back to that afternoon in October. It was warm and I was sitting on a couch in front of a pair of windows that looked down on Gilman Street. Through the open window I could hear the guy on my floor loading stuff from his room into a small truck. A couple of people were helping him, going up and down the stairs, one of whom was the girl.

The door to my room was ajar and the girl came in quickly, in a forthright manner that didn't quite make sense. She came up near me and leaned over the couch to look out the window by propping her hands on the windowsill. As she scanned the street below, the position of her body and outstretched arms was so near and so provocative, I almost reached for her. She wore a confused expression as she drew back from the window and stepped back from the couch.

"Look," she said, "you know… I don't know how to say this…"

Our situation was very unusual for both of us for very different reasons. I felt like a dream girl had suddenly appeared in my room and was unable to compose my thoughts. If the mysterious stranger is right about what she told him, or them, she felt rushed and awkward because she didn't want to get caught warning me.

As she listened for sounds in the hall, she said more. "You have to be careful," she said. "They're planning something…"

The cadence of footsteps coming up the stairs made her rush to the door. She looked furtively at me one more time and slipped out into the hall.

"Wait…" I said as she went out the door and down the stairs. I never saw her up close again, though I did see her in the street by the truck shortly after she left my room. I remember her well because our exchange had been so unusual and she had been so animated and beautiful. I thought that maybe she had the hots for me and maybe I would see her again. But I also thought that maybe I had offended her and would never see her again. I had no idea that she was trying to warn me of anything, though in retrospect I can see that she was.

The stranger said that the guy who was moving out was part of the group that included Denny Dink and Chip. The girl, he said, had been a peripheral member of that group but had left it after she learned they were going to harm me.

"That's why she came forward when we worked Madison for information about you. She was disgusted by it… but also afraid," he said.

To my knowledge, there are three people—all of them women—who tried in some way to warn me about what was going on. The first was the nurse who warned me and my mother before my eye operation, the second was a girl at a party in Madison during my sophomore year, and the third was the girl described just above.

With the second one, it happened this way. One afternoon while a bunch of us were drinking beer and smoking dope around a coffee table in a dim apartment, she was kneeling with her head on her boyfriend's knee and pushing with her foot against my lower leg. It wasn't a light push, but a long and heavy one. It might have made sense if I had known her and was saying something stupid; then I would have taken it as a sign to shut up. But I was just sitting there saying nothing. It didn't seem like a come-on either because the way she did it had been much too forceful. The mysterious stranger explained her, too. "She was trying to warn you. Those guys had been discussing what kind of shit to put into the pot you were getting from them and how to fuck you up. She didn't like what they were doing. It's too bad she never said anything to you later on. Did you ever see her again?"

"No, I didn't."

"Maybe you just didn't recognize her… There have been so many people you didn't recognize…"

If someone tries to warn you about something that you have no knowledge or concept of, it won't make sense to you. It's scary, but that is one way evil flourishes in this world. Even when we are warned, even very explicitly, it may not make any sense to us. If you have no concept of the sort of evil a group is doing, it won't seem possible even if someone you trust tries to tell you. At least that's my experience. Some readers may be having similar experiences with what I have written in this volume.

The mysterious stranger continued with the Gilman Street topic. "What happened later that night? Was that the night you slept thirty-six hours and got up thinking it was the same day but it wasn't?"

At the time I was working the night shift at a nursing facility to pay for school and living expenses. I generally went to bed at seven in the morning after I had gotten off work. I couldn't remember if that strange thirty-six hour sleep had happened then or another day.

"It might have been. I can't be sure…" I said.

"Did you ever wake up to someone in your room?" he asked.

"Once I did. I remember someone moving around. It was dark."

"God, that's creepy," he said. "It's frightening." He shivered visibly and drew back from me.

Since I didn't know what he knew, I didn't have much feeling about that time in Madison in October. The parts of the story had not been fitted together in my mind.

"From what that girl told us and from other stuff, we are pretty sure that guy in the other room cleaned you clock a second time that night or day, when you went to sleep."

I actually received this information calmly. It made sense and as the moments passed, more pieces of the puzzle came together.

"Another Jewish psychopath," I said quietly, composed.

He nodded darkly. I could tell that the stranger expected me to share his horror, but I didn't. I don't know why. Is it due to having my clock cleaned repeatedly or to having a past that makes no sense? How can I feel something that makes no sense? I bet victims of Bolshevik terror had dissociative mental states like mine. Torn from their lives, their apartments and things stolen, interrogated by idiots over nonsense and taken to a courtyard to kneel and be shot in the head. What could they have felt?

Arendt said evil is banal. It's not banal. It's just fucking stupid.

It's done by shitheads.

The stranger asked me to describe more and I did. What I remember is feeling extremely vague one day. Like a very small child in a man's body. I went outside. It was warm. I started walking toward *The Gaza* to get some food, but lost any sense of what I was doing. Lost my purpose. I felt timid in the warm sun which was still shining in Madison. I turned back and went back to my room, where I sat for a long time. At some point I realized that I had slept for thirty-six hours.

It was a day later than I had thought, which means they knew my work schedule because the lost day was my day-off.

The way you can tell if you have been given an intracranial tattoo is you feel vague, weak, and like a little kid. It's quite horrible because much of what you were remains, but there is no you in there anymore. Just a little kid who really does not know how things work anymore. Other people barely notice, if at all. To them, you seem tired, lost in thought, maybe taking drugs. Human dynamics are very sensitive, so people naturally drift away. The feedback from you is wrong. You seem dull, uninterested, silly. Other people may like that about you so you can find new friends but the transition is slow, tortuous, weird, irresolute, never complete. It's like you are dead but still here. A little kid in a hollow tube of flesh.

I guess I was a soldier in a war of deception I did not know was going on.

"You're a stupid fucking idiot," the stranger said. "You probably deserved it."

That made my brain feel like a prison.

"What's even more fucked up is we don't even think that's the last time. Do you remember when you took ecstasy in New Hampshire?"

"Yes, I do," I said, already divining what he was going to say next.

"Remember how fucked up you felt the next day?"

"Yes." I lost a lot of smarts and memory that night. I wish I hadn't but I did."

"It's the same…"

"Honestly, I don't think so. It was the drug. How could anyone know I was going to take that stuff that night?"

"What did you do?"

"I took one and it didn't do much, so I took another one."

"Then what did you do?"

"I sort of meditated until I fell asleep. After that I don't remember anything till the next day. It was the middle of the woods. No one would have known what I was doing that night," I said.

"What you don't fucking understand is it's fucking *easy* to know what you were doing that night… What kills me is you can't get away from them even if you go live in a cabin in the middle of the woods. How much did you spend per year out there?"

"I lived on about $3,000 per year."

"Three thousand bucks. I can't believe it…"

"I had no bills and ate simply."

"No, I mean… there you are a dumbshit living way in the woods with no fucking money and they still can't leave you alone. It's amazing people can be like that. You are absolutely wiped out and they still have to go after you… They can't even let you write a book."

"But how could they know I was taking that shit that night? I had those pills for months…"

"Miniature cameras, microphones… it's totally fucking easy. We have equipment now that people will be amazed by in twenty years. It's a piece of cake to bug that place… We did it to you, too…"

"You? What?"

"I can't say more. Look, some of your old friends want to buy you a house. People figure if you have a house you will feel better and won't be a danger to anyone…"

"Danger? What the fuck?"

"A lot of people think you are some kind of psycho who might flip out any time. What gets me is you are exactly the kind of person who couldn't do shit even if you tried…"

The stranger glared at me again though a glimmer of kindness showed on his face.

I fell silent. Thoughts of my old cabin came into my mind. I loved the sounds of the wind in the trees, bare branches clacking in winter. Could someone have come out there and given me a third tattoo? It seemed crazy, but not unprecedented. They could have just come in the door and shot me with a dart and I would have forgotten everything. Or they could have shot me when I went out to take a piss.

"We think they use a needle and go in through the nostril so it doesn't show a bruise," the stranger said. "It's too fucking horrible… But God, it's an effective way to fuck us up. People see you… big, good-looking guy with brains, but you can't do shit. Awkward as a fucking baby. You make everybody around you feel bad…"

I could see him wrestle with feelings of pity and contempt for me. I don't blame him or anyone for feelings like that. I don't feel pity for myself, more embarrassment and contempt. But that's close enough that I can relate to what he was feeling.

"The deal with the house," the stranger continued, "is you have to stay in it. You can't travel around. You can have some money and go around the area, but you have to keep living in the house."

"So, house arrest?"

"No, not like that. People just want you to settle down. You'll find a woman and things will change for you. If you can handle it, we can even give you a job." His mind seemed to drift off into a multitude of considerations. "You can't have a job at their level. They worked too hard for that, but you can get something good. You might be good at training young guys. You know, the young guys don't listen to us anymore. No matter what we do, they just don't listen anymore…"

"I can't do that. I don't want to do that. Those guys don't owe me. They didn't do anything to me."

The stranger looked both angry and pleased. It occurred to me that he was jealous that I had an offer like that. "You paid your dues…" he said, then his voice trailed off. Silence. Then as if from another room he said, "Guys said you would refuse if you were any fucking good…"

It had nothing to do with being good. It was simply an offer no one could accept.

Chapter Thirty-one

After finishing my last semester at Madison and receiving my degree, I went to Scarsvale to stay with my parents. That whole year post-tattoo I felt very vague. And I did almost nothing, both while I was in Madison and while I was in Scarsvale. My Chinese teacher assumed out loud more than once that I was tired from working so much. I am not sure what my parents thought. I spent the winter and spring in Scarsvale painting and wall papering the house.

Chapter Thirty-two

Consciousness is a blessing, our greatest human blessing, but when consciousness turns into calculation it becomes a curse. Calculating consciousness no longer seeks to expand awareness, but rather to use awareness to expand control, to amass, to aggrandize. Narcissism and materialism are two examples. When consciousness is a tool of either, it does not become more aware, but less aware. How can anyone go against these apparent imperatives? How can I expand my awareness without harming yours?

I think my mom was groping in this direction when she reached out to me in her late seventies. Yes, she felt ashamed, regretful, sorry she had not been "a better" mother to me, but I think she also saw more—now that she was old and relaxed, she saw that she had dimmed her own mind by pursuing what she had calculated to be her role, her advantage, her impoverished sense of triumph. In pursuing "her" interests at the expense of truly knowing herself and her family, she had relinquished her consciousness. She had spent it on trinkets. I think she saw that and tried, in her own way, to make amends.

"I am sorry," she said to me so many times. "I didn't realize what I was doing…"

I might add to her words now, "what I was doing *to you and myself, to all of us*."

For my part, I didn't fully realize what she was accomplishing with her confessions and revisions of the past, not at the time. As I look back now, I do realize that she spent considerable energy taking me on drives in her car or to the Chinese restaurant where we would have real conversations with each other. For years, I had tried to reach out to my sisters and brother, to communicate deeply with them as compensation, in many ways, for what I had never received from my parents. How fitting that as I slowly gave up my efforts toward my siblings, my mom took them up toward me. And she did a *better* job than I had. She was the better person. She took the risks, she apologized, she displayed contrition and joy in my dim, but growing understanding of what she was doing. She left me the gift that is still giving today. She was never—or rarely—the loving mother who stroked my hair, hugged me, or kissed me. For years, she had been a wooden figure to me. One who cooked well and occasionally gave me

money to go to a matinee or the swimming pool, but never one who listened or talked or taught. What a gift that was, too! For in the state she was in, she had so little to teach I was far, far better off not knowing it.

Then, when she did have something to teach, something to give, my mom gave with all her heart. She gave me a gift that is far better than hugs and kisses and corporal security in infancy. She gave me a profound example of human transformation. She gave me vastly deepened awareness of her and my own, our mutual, consciousness. She knew what she had done and not done. She knew where she had gone wrong and she laid it all out for me, to the best of her ability and as completely as she could. She could not have done better or done more.

"Tommy," she told me as she leaned over the table in the Chinese restaurant, "I was always very worried about sending you to Wosta Academy. Don't blame your father. His old friend from school was the headmaster and I know he thought that your knowing him would be good for you. It's a tragedy that he was fired shortly after you arrived at school…" The headmaster had appeared at one of the school assemblies mildly drunk and was dismissed soon after.

"Do you know why I was against your going to that school?"

"Because it was in that God-forsaken city?" I replied.

"Yes, it is God-forsaken," she said, turning her mind inward for a moment. "And now you have become like us in some ways… it's true. It's a rough town… But that's not why. We didn't send you there to make you like us and I was not afraid of your going because of the town." She paused again, not for effect, but because the words were hard for her to say.

"My father was a cook at Wosta Academy, did you know that?"

"Yes, I knew that," I said. While I was a student at Wosta Academy, my grandfather's job had seemed only a vaguely relevant detail to me. It was a bit unusual I knew, and something I kept to myself, but it did not seem to have major significance to me.

"When he and my mother first arrived in the United States," my mom continued, "they went to Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. My father worked in a coal mine for his first year in this country. After that, he said 'the hell with this. I am not going to do this for the rest of my life.' Coal is a hard life and he saw that it mostly led nowhere… so he found a job in Wosta. There was a small Lithuanian community there then, and he was able to find work through the few people he knew."

"I think you have sort of alluded to that in the past, but you never put it so plainly."

"The reason I was reluctant to send you to that school is my father was very disappointed there—he worked for years and expected to become the head chef, but when the time came and they needed a new one, he was not chosen. I honestly think it killed him. He died of a heart-attack shortly after. He was loading hay onto a truck on our farm in northern Massachusetts. I think he knew what was coming and wanted to die. He didn't call out or do anything. He just lay down and died."

As I think about it now, my grandfather's job seems like a strained plot development in a story about a typical American immigrant family. Grandson goes to school where grandfather sweated in the kitchen; grandson becomes football star and marries the headmaster's daughter. Hah! At the time, I was so fucked up I could hardly walk across campus, let alone play on the football team and our headmaster

got fired for being drunk. And after that, one of the worst teachers in the school was made temporary headmaster. He was a nasty little shit who was in full cahoots with Fecenian and his gang. I do sincerely thank him now, though, for showing me the fullness of life's hellishness.

Thinking back, I hope my grandfather experienced a similar moment of grateful transformation as he collapsed by the truck full of hay. I am not being sardonic. I truly hope he was as grateful as he fell to the ground as I am today.

This is a very shitty world filled with creepy people and you might as well learn the fullness of it. While Heidi and I were at Circle Road I often looked at my grandfather's photograph where it hung in my mom's bedroom. He stood straight and with an air of humble confidence that working people display when away from their often miserable jobs. I can see where I got my large chest and jaw with too much awareness. My mom always said that he read a great deal and was an excellent talker.

My mom's understanding of his unhappiness may have been a part of the reason she wanted to escape Wosta to make her way in New York where she and my dad could play in a bigger game. And my grandfather's story, or his power to influence me after death thorough ways we do not understand, may be a primary reason why I cannot take New York, or any society, seriously. All I see in them is crude structures overseen by sociopaths who manipulate those below them. I have never observed a human group of any appreciable size that is anything more, or less, than a psychopathic prison dance where tortured faces substitute grimaces for smiles. Where troubles are many and pleasures are few.

The food at Wosta was not too bad. It was institutional food, but it was OK, often better than OK. One of my worst mornings there, though, did involve the food. I went to the food-service counter to get my spoonful of scrambled eggs with toast. A young woman, with a worker's reddened rough face, handed me the plate across a cloud of steam. The counter was high and we both had to lift our arms to give and receive the plate. The day was cold. The room was cold. My heart was cold. Did she see me as the grandson of a distant colleague or as the son of a wealthy family, bound for college and an easy career? Why ask? We all know the answer. I took my plate, put it on my tray, got some coffee and orange juice and went to one of the long tables to sit and eat by myself. The cups and plates were a solid, earth-colored plastic. The steamy eggs were warm and good enough. As I consumed them, my fork slowly worked through the dully gleaming skin that was forming across the surface of the eggs. Having nothing pleasant on my mind, I carefully observed the steam coming off the eggs and dissipating into the large, cold room. Like so much of life, it was mildly disgusting—the cheap plate, the powdered eggs—and mildly beautiful as it glistened and gave off vapor and warmth. As I worked another forkful out of the mass of eggs, I saw something strange. Like the eggs and the plate, it was a yellowy, earthen color, but it didn't have the contour of the eggs and it was on my fork. I overturned my fork and poked at the thing. I still couldn't make out what it was. As I poked again, it became clear—the tangled circle of someone's band-aid had come off and fallen from one of their fingers into the scrabbled egg mix.

I immediately stopped eating, even stopped drinking my coffee. My appetite had been obliterated, but I did not immediately get up and leave. I sat for a long moment and wondered if the band-aid had belonged to the young woman at the counter or to someone else, someone hidden in the kitchen, someone I would never see.

Chapter Thirty-three

One day at breakfast, my mom said to Heidi, "You are a kind, thoughtful, considerate lady."

Heidi replied, "Well, thanks. I hope so."

To which my mom quickly added, "I'm calling you a *lady*."

I often tell Heidi that she has become one of my mom's daughters. She has two mother's now because my mom surely passed something profound on to her.

As time went by, we noticed that my mom gradually stopped doing things, or started doing them differently. The first big change we noticed was that she stopped going into her bathroom at night and changing into her pajamas. Instead, she simply removed her shoes and climbed straight into bed with the rest of her day clothes on. She began using her walker regularly and stopped coming into the kitchen for lunch. For a long time it had been her habit to go to the kitchen at twelve o'clock sharp and wait for lunch. Then the timing got fuzzy, and then she stopped going at all. We would bring lunch to her where she sat in the red room or the sun porch.

Eventually she also stopped asking for the newspaper in the morning. It had long been her habit to read *The New York Times* while sipping her coffee. Slowly, she read less and less of it, and at last she stopped even thinking about it. Another habit of hers had been to mark each day off on a calendar hanging on a wall in the kitchen. Every day, she would place a large check mark in the day's square. As the months passed, the check marks became sporadic and then gradually disappeared completely. As that happened, she began to care not at all which day it was. She also stopped asking for her drink at night. Sometimes I would offer to make her a drink and she might accept, but it was clear that she did not enjoy alcohol the way she had in the past. For the last two years of her life, the most she ever drank was an ounce or two of beer mixed into a glass of orange juice. She seemed to enjoy that occasionally.

For Heidi and me, her "decline" was and is not exactly a sad story. As she lost many of the normal skills of life, she gained in depth and generosity of spirit. She sang with greater feeling and often encouraged me to keep playing if I showed signs of stopping. "You are the best gasoline-player I have ever heard," she said to me one night, referring to my guitar playing.

"Thanks, mom, that is one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me," I replied, and I meant it.

"Keep playing," she said with a huge smile on her face. "Play and play and play every day. Enjoy yourself and play what you have inside."

I knew that wasn't much, but I felt encouraged nonetheless.

For her part, Heidi noticed that my mom stopped being suspicious of her or harsh toward her in any way. Some of the change was surely due to my mom's condition and the ways she was adapting to it, but some of it must also have been due to our policy of never lying to her and always responding to her in a way that made her words count, even if we weren't completely sure what she meant. In doing this, Heidi and I both also made important gains ourselves for we became much more aware of what we were saying to each other.

One morning, as my mom was lying in bed looking confused, Heidi went into her bedroom to see how she was.

"What should I be doing?" my mom asked as Heidi drew beside her bed, her knees gently touching the mattress.

"Well, you can get up, or you can stay in bed," Heidi replied in the clear, strong tones my mom was best able to hear.

"Which should I do?" my mom asked.

"It's up to you," Heidi said.

"What do most people do?" my mom said with some concern, gazing at Heidi.

We have recalled this scene many times since that day. Sometimes we laugh and sometimes we marvel at her strange presence of mind. *What do most people do?* No matter how far she drifted from conventional reality or how much she hallucinated, my mom always retained some sense of being a person existing in a coherent world. She had always possessed an elemental life force that showed in her purposive stride, in her peculiar dreams of neighborly love, in her ability to reconfigure everything around her to fit with her own vision.

At some point during the summer or early fall of 2011, Heidi completely took over the job of doing personal care for my mom. It became clear to all of us that, as my mom needed more help, Heidi was the better person to provide it. By this time, also, the two of them got along very well. My mom never complained and virtually always did whatever Heidi asked. Heidi's innate kindness and our years of being completely truthful with my mom were paying off for all of us. During her last years, my mom trusted Heidi more than anyone in the world.

"Well, maybe it's a good time to get up. How would that be?" Heidi asked.

"What a good idea," my mom replied as she started moving her body to prepare for the task of sitting up.

We helped only as much as seemed necessary. Though it might take her four or five tries to sit up, my mom was able to do it on her own. Heidi would stand near her and offer encouragement and occasionally a well-placed hand on her shoulder, but usually my mom was able to sit up and then stand up on her own.

On most mornings, my mom went into her bathroom followed by Heidi and cleaned herself with little or no complaint, but sometimes she would resist even Heidi. Who could blame her? It is difficult and frustrating to have to clean yourself with old, withered hands on a cold morning.

"No more!" she yelled one morning as she was wiping herself after using the toilet. "I'm clean! Clean! Clean!" she said in protest. "I'm not doing any more!"

After a pause, Heidi pulled one of my mom's used wipes from the plastic bag she had put it in and held it up. "You call this clean?" she asked.

Heidi told me later that she felt bad about doing that. She could tell by her look that my mom felt defeated, so she got down on her knees in front of her and put her hand on my mom's arm.

"Julia," she said. "It's very important that we keep you clean. It's important for your health. I'm not trying to boss you around. I'm trying to help you stay clean."

"I don't blame you at all," my mom replied in the direct tones of the very old. After that, she accepted a few more towelettes without the slightest protest. Heidi told me later that she felt that it had been a very good exchange between them and that my mom had looked at her with deep understanding.

During late fall of 2011, my mom's schedule started swinging around much more than usual. Sometimes she slept very late into the afternoon and sometimes she got up early. We wanted to prevent her losing all sense of a twenty-four hour cycle, so I spoke to her about it one day, explaining that we wanted her to try to maintain a normal schedule because it was good for her and we did not want to have to get up in the middle of the night to take care of her.

"You can just ignore me if I wake up," she said.

"No, we can't, mom, because sometimes you are dreaming and we don't want you to hurt yourself."

She seemed to understand what I had said and from then on began to maintain a more regular schedule. One morning after that, she was already sitting up in her bed when Heidi went to check on her at about seven o'clock. Heidi ran downstairs to the basement to get clean pants for her and then ran back upstairs to get to her before she tried to walk to the bathroom on her own. By the time she got back to my mom's bedroom, she was already headed toward the bathroom. Heidi followed her in and they went through their usual morning routine without the slightest difficulty. Heidi said she seemed to be in a very good mood and very calm.

With a big smile she said to Heidi, "Aren't you cute! Cute and *honorable!*"

It was the first time either one of us had ever heard her use the word honorable in that way. It was a well-chosen word, for Heidi, I knew, was indeed honorable. Over the years, she has shown me with great consistency that she always opts for the most honorable way of doing things. How many people have set their inner compasses to "honorable" in all things? I wish I had done it more myself and feel privileged to learn this from Heidi. I cannot doubt her because I have seen with my own eyes how my own senile old mother looked at her, always with a smile, always calm, never afraid, always appreciative.

Early in the fall of 2011, Heidi and I started double-teaming her when my mom went down the stairs in the morning and up them in the evening. She seemed able enough to get herself from the bottom of the stairs to the kitchen without our help, but we were afraid to let her use the stairs on her own anymore. Her arms and legs were still strong, but she was no longer steady enough. We both knew that the stairs were the most dangerous thing in her life. On many occasions, I offered to move her bed downstairs so she would be able to avoid them entirely. "Tommy," she replied. "Those stairs are what are keeping me alive. No, I do not want my bed moved downstairs. Thank you."

During the night, it was our habit to check downstairs when either of us got up to pee. If her light was still on when it was late, we would go down to see if she needed any help.

One night, Heidi noticed her light still on at about three in the morning and went downstairs.

"Is everything OK?" she asked as she entered my mom's bedroom.

"Yes, everything's fine," my mom replied completely unruffled.

"It's *very* late, you know…"

"Well, maybe it is taking me a *little* longer than usual to get into bed," my mom explained.

Heidi said, "It's three AM."

My mom's jaw dropped and her eyes opened wide. She fumbled in her sleeve for her watch, pulled it out, and showed it to Heidi.

"See?" Heidi said. "It's almost three in the morning."

"I'm going to bed!" Then fingering her quilt, she asked, "What's this?"

"It's your quilt."

"Really?" my mom said in disbelief. By this time in her life, she was often unable to remember that she was even in her own bedroom, let alone what the objects on her bed might be.

"Yes, it's your quilt. Now please lie down and I will turn off the lights for you."

"Will you be OK in the dark?" my mom asked as Heidi tucked her in.

"Yes, I will," Heidi replied.

As Heidi left the darkened room, she heard my mom call out to her, "Thank you very much!"

Chapter Thirty-four

During the winter of 2011, she started having more trouble going up and down the stairs. Heidi and I continued to double-team her on her way up and down, but it was clear to both of us that she would eventually take to her bed and no longer be able to negotiate the stairs. I know now that her physical infirmity and uncertain gait were primarily caused by her advancing DLB and not just her "getting old" as I tended to think at that time.

One morning in February, I heard the following conversation. My mom was lying in bed while Heidi was talking her through their early morning routine, describing all the things they were going to do.

When she had finished, my mom said, "Wait a minute. So, first I'm going to stand up, go to the bathroom, and *pee*, and then I'm going to go downstairs and have coffee. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. But we're also going to change your pants and underpants while we're in the bathroom, like we do every morning. That's our daily routine."

According to Heidi, her jaw dropped when she heard that. "We do that every morning?" she said, astonished.

"Yes, we do," Heidi replied.

"And *I'm* a part of it?"

Before dinner that evening, we were all sitting around the kitchen table. I was looking through the mail and noticed something from my health insurance company. Individual policies in the New York market were very expensive back then and my company seemed always to do the minimum. Since Heidi had a similar policy, I asked her, "Have you looked through that fuckin piece of shit from the insurance company?"

"No, not yet," she replied.

After a few seconds, my mom, who never swore, looked up and repeated my words "…fucking piece of shit…," she said.

Heidi and I were momentarily stunned and then started laughing.

Without breaking a smile, but displaying great awareness in her eyes, my mom continued, "Those were *your* words." Indeed, they were.

I don't think she was being critical or trying to be funny. She was simply mirroring what she saw and heard around her.

A week or so later, she was full of energy early one morning. She sat up quickly with an air of determination. As Heidi was helping her button her sweater, she said to my mom, "This sweater is from Mira. Isn't it lovely?"

It was a bright red wool cardigan. Mira had sewn onto it Velcro strips as closures and decorated it with add-on pockets, and a patch that said *Royal Navy*.

As my mom sat and admired the sweater, she said, "Wow! Do I get all this?"

"You deserve it," Heidi replied.

"Oh! Oh, you are wonderful!"

Heidi was crouched in front of my mom still fiddling with the red sweater. My mom then took her head in her arms and kissed the top of it.

The red sweater was Mira at her best. It was funny, maybe slightly disrespectful, loving, visually appealing, and my mom adored it. The *Royal Navy* patch, at least partly, referred to our habit of sometimes calling my mom "The General." I started calling her that in the 1970s and my siblings picked up on it. We were never derisive in our use of that nickname, but it was meant as slightly critical jibe at my mom's tendency to be bossy and not listen to other points of view. Mira's use of the patch seemed very appropriate to me as it showed deep levels of puzzlement, ambiguity, and love for our senile old mom.

DLB is characterized by ups and downs. My mom's enthusiastic day with the red sweater soon gave over to states of confusion.

A few days later, at breakfast she said, "I love this table. What a beautiful kitchen table. Tables, curtains, spins, motorcycles…"

That evening, I told her that Heidi and I were going for a walk.

She replied, "Why not? There's no streetlight here."

The next day, she was drinking tea and while looking at Heidi said, "You are a beautiful person. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. In charge of everything: Life, reality, Christmas, and everything too."

In early April, my mom fell in her bedroom one night. After getting her up the stairs and seeing her safely into her bedroom, we usually let her turn out her light and get herself into bed.

That night Heidi awoke to hear her calling from her bedroom below. She went downstairs. The lights were off, but she could hear my mom making noises. Heidi turned on the light to see my mom sitting on the floor with her legs outstretched before her. She was making completely futile attempts to lift herself with her arms, barely budging her upper body at all.

"Oh, that's much better!" she exclaimed when the lights went on.

"I guess I am going to have to pick you up," Heidi said as she approached my mom.

"Thank you, but I can do it myself. There's no way you could pick me up."

Rather than call me to help her, Heidi accepted the challenge and did hoist my mom up, turn her, and get her into a sitting position on her bed. Heidi said later that my mom looked at her in complete amazement.

That fall was the beginning of a new phase for my mom. She came downstairs a few more times during the next week, but after that, she never came downstairs again. She simply didn't want to. She spent the next year and a half in her bedroom. During the day, she sat on the side of her bed or sometimes in a chair. Her meals were placed on a small table beside her and she fed herself using her right hand. Her left hand gradually became so stiff she could not even open her fist. Heidi prepared wonderful meals of bite-size, high-energy foods. Butter, salmon, liverwurst, eggs, cream cheese, chopped homemade sauerkraut, fruits, and vegetables were combined in various ways to make small balls that my mom could pick up with her fingers. Heidi often sprinkled paprika or something colorful over them so my mom could see them better. On many occasions as I sat with her, playing guitar or just visiting, I watched my mom slowly consume her food balls. It often took her as much as twenty minutes to pick up a ball, chew it, and swallow it. Nonetheless, she ate with evident satisfaction and often exclaimed at how wonderful everything tasted. Her life-long habit of never taking pain medications may have helped her at this stage because she was able to feel and enjoy many sensations that might have been lost to her if she had been using analgesics.

The night after she fell, as Heidi was putting her to bed, she accidentally threw the gathered blankets in such a way that they covered my mom's head. My mom lay still and allowed Heidi to remove the blankets from her face. Clearly seeing humor in the situation, my mom said, "You're trying to get rid of me! But why get *rid* of me?" Both of them laughed at the comment. The closeness of their bond shows in the mutual trust and what was said and left unsaid in that small exchange. Heidi said good-night and turned out the lights.

On another night in the week after her fall, while we were standing in the hallway outside her room, we heard her say, "Oh thank you, thank you, thank you… That is lovely… My son Tommy is a smart and very capable man… Goody, goody, goody… And I don't have to worry about *that* at all… Put it over to the left… They are taking very good care of me."

As we stood in the hall in front of my mom's shrine to the Virgin Mary, it seemed as if she were talking to someone else who was checking up on her.

Again we heard her say, "Yes, they are taking very good care of me… My good, graceful, in-control people… they help me so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you." I will refrain from speculating about who she was talking to, but to my ear her voice was uniquely forthright and clear, unlike her voice at any other time that I had ever heard. It sounded like she was speaking with a small group of people who had come to check up on her.

Six days after her fall, I had the following conversation with her.

"How long can I stay here, Tommy?" she asked. "Is there a date?"

"This is your house mom. You are in your own bedroom. You have lived here for fifty years and you can stay as long as you like."

"Oh…so the house belongs to me…and I'm not being ejected?" she asked. I knew that she was completely serious about her questions.

"No, you are not being ejected at all," I said.

"Oh, I love that… not being ejected at all. Do I owe any money?"

"No, you don't. You don't have a worry in the world."

"Oh Tommy, what a wonderful thing to hear! So, when I die, who takes over the house?"

"It'll probably be sold."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"But *who* will take it over?" she asked.

"We can't control that, mom. We can't control who buys the house."

"I see. But won't one of you want to live here?"

"I don't think so, mom. We all have places to live and this house is too big for us."

"I see," she said. "Then who will get the money from the sale?"

"It will be split among your four children as you have directed."

"Oh, that's good. That's right."

"Mom, why are you asking me these questions?"

"Well, I have to face certain things."

"Like what?"

"Uh… clothing…what will I do with my possessions?"

"You don't have to worry about anything like that. We will take care of everything for you."

"Oh Tommy, you're wonderful! I'm so glad I have a family that's *not dumb!*"

Sometime later that day, we had a similar conversation but with more emphasis on where she was and what she should be doing.

I told her again that she was in her own house in her own bedroom.

"You mean this is *my* bedroom?"

"Yes, it is."

"And I can stay here as long as I like?"

"Yes, you can."

At that she placed her hands on either side of her and as she stroked her bed with them she looked around the room. As much to herself as to me she said in a dreamy tone, "I could stay here *a long time*." She seemed very satisfied and pleased. That moment was very important to me because I could see that she truly was content and that she would not have any trouble adjusting to staying in her bedroom. I also knew that we were helping her get what she had always wanted—a peaceful end to her life in her own home, cared for by her own family.

Chapter Thirty-five

Gradually, my mom ate less and stayed in bed more. Before long, she did not get up anymore. She might move around her bed in a REM state or want help getting into a chair, but within a few weeks she never went to her bathroom again or left her bedroom for other parts of the house. We used a wheelchair to take her out to a small porch off her bedroom a couple of times, but the ordeal of doing that did not seem to benefit her overall. She became accustomed to staying inside, enjoying the view from her window and visits from us and other family members when they had time. Only one person from the Scarsvale Congregational Church visited her after her fall. I see nothing strange or bad about that. Most of her friends had died and there was not much the church could do for her or us.

My mom typically spent her days sitting on the side of her bed facing a window that looked out over the side yard and a couple of houses beyond. She often commented on what she was seeing out the window. Sometimes she and I both saw the same thing—trees, houses, a patch of green lawn or snow—and sometimes she saw things I could not: people walking past, maybe talking, maybe waving to her. She often achieved a blissful expression as she sat and stared at the window. If you entered her room quietly and approached her slowly, she frequently would remain deep in her reverie until long after you had sat down. With a dreamy expression, her attention might slowly shift from the window to me sitting in a chair near the foot of her bed. If I did not move, she might turn back to the window. If I raised my hand in greeting, she might say, "Oh, there you are!"

To which, I might reply, "Hi, mom. What are you doing?"

"Why, I'm waiting for *you!*"

"Do you want to hear some music?"

"Oh, yes, I do."

During this period, my mom experienced very smooth and gentle ups and downs. Some days she would be sleepy or mildly confused. On others, she would appear deeply contented. She rarely suffered pain and never seemed bored or angry with her state. She unfailingly expressed gratitude for everything we did. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you. Aren't you wonderful!" It was an utterly guileless gratitude, born of a peaceful mind and life-long good manners.

For the first few months after her fall, she did not want to eat very much, so Heidi and I worked out several different ways to get her to take extra food. The best method seemed to be to engage her in conversation while occasionally slipping something into her mouth. If we presented food to her normally, she would ignore it or refuse. Months later, after she was used to being in bed all the time, she was better able to feed herself, or more willing to do so.

One morning, I went in to see her. She seemed despondent and more confused than usual.

"How are you, mom?" I asked.

"I'm so lost," she replied.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know anything about the functioning of this house," she said.

I knew that she had already given up a great deal of her former self by ceding control of almost everything in the house to Heidi and me, and now she could not even remember how things were supposed to be done.

"Mom, why waste your time worrying about stuff like that? Heidi and I will take care of everything. You have reached a point in your life where you can relax and enjoy yourself."

"I don't know, Tommy," she replied, looking forlorn.

"Mom," I said. "Here is something else to think about—you are the oldest member of this family."

"Yes…" she said waiting for more.

"Well, as the oldest member of the family, you set an example for all of us."

"And…"

"And if you feel good, we all feel good. It all comes down from you."

I had said something similar to her a few times in the past. It was a kind of reasoning she understood and responded to very well.

As I stood before her, I watched her shoulders straighten. Then she tugged on her sleeve and gave me a shy look. Her face flushed pink and then broke into a smile. By this time, she had probably forgotten what we had just said, but the line of thought had gone to the right place. Her demeanor was transformed. Again, I believe a reason this may have happened—and it happened more than once—is I never lied to her and she knew it. I meant every word I said. There was no artifice in my words, no lies, and she knew it. She really was important to us and her feelings did affect all of us greatly. The years Heidi and I spent with her were some of the most interesting and productive years in both of our lives, so the truth I told her was real and she knew it.

I know that it may be hard for some people to understand how a senile old lady who could not walk and could barely feed herself could matter to us, to anyone. But it wasn't her skills, her talents, or her intelligence that mattered to us. It was *her*. Demented, ancient, half her teeth falling out—none of that detracted from her. Were Heidi and I reacting to her spirit, her soul? I don't know. I do know that to us, she was very much alive and gave far more than she took. Just as she could be transported by what she

saw out her window or who she saw gliding along the ceiling of her bedroom, she transported us to some higher plane. A Thai friend told me, "It's because you are caring for her. The Buddha, he bless you. Everything go good for you, right? It's because you care for her."

When I think about what my friend said, I see the good results—the good karma—she is referring to as a natural outcome not of my actions but of my mom's. For it was her conscious and deliberate growth in understanding and her willingness to learn and reach out to me in so many ways that changed everything for both of us.

In this respect, I see Buddhist thought—indeed all deep religious thought—as being based on a natural tropism that can be found in all living things. At its most basic, this tropism is a tendency toward elementary self-interest. At its best it is a tendency toward moral behavior, wise thinking, higher consciousness.

Citron and Mountebank worked the low rungs of this natural tropism—the rungs of cruelty, duplicity, greed, and treachery in the service of unrepentant self-interest.

Before my mom started her sessions with her friends, she also worked the lower rungs of basic existence. She never went as low as Citron or Mountebank, but she tended to be self-absorbed and not very wise about many of her decisions. After her sessions with her friends, when her mind was opened in her late seventies, I believe she came to realize that the lower rungs of her existential tropism were not truly what were best for her or anyone.

This allowed her to free herself from the cultural ideals that had formed around her when she was young. In her old age, her natural tropism of "self-interest" began to include a much wider vision of the world and what is truly best for her. She became honest with herself and with me, and from this we both gained enormously.

None of this change in her required the trappings of religion—though her altar on the second floor probably did help—and none of it required extensive psychologizing. It only required a deepening of her natural tropism which allowed her to welcome honest communion with her friends, honest communion with her own mind and, then to my benefit, honest communion with me. What it showed me is that deep transformation is possible at any age and that my mom had always had the potential for it.

When I was young, before Mountebank, I asked my mom several times if she believed the Christian religion. She always answered, "No."

"Then why do you go to church?" I asked.

"It's a *social* organization," she replied. "I have friends there."

"What do you believe?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, what happens after death? Nothing?"

"Yes. When you die, you're gone."

After a long pause from me, she added, "And I don't care what you say about me when I am dead."

I am not sure she would have given the same answer—had I asked the question and had she been able to focus on it—during the last years of her life. And I am not sure she meant it as starkly as she had put it when I was twelve years old. In those days, the question had meant to her a clear choice between two distinct categories—to believe or not to believe as defined by traditional Christianity.

In her last years, she didn't need the tradition any longer because she was able to experience in herself the source of belief, first in communion with her friends and me and then in the opening of awareness. In the figures she saw on the ceiling of her bedroom and through her window, in the sanctity of her dying body, I know my mom often lived that peace "which surpasseth all understanding."

As her son, I have taken the words she spoke to me so many years ago—*and I don't care what you say about me when I am dead*—as permission from her to write about her now. I hope I have said some of what she would have wanted and I hope I have said it well enough to be honest and true without demeaning her or anyone else.

In the closet in her bedroom, my mom had a large collection of shirts, "blouses," as she would have called them. Many had floral prints or were made of silk. One day, Heidi noticed that many of her blouses had padded shoulders sewn into to them by an amateur hand—obviously, my mom's.

"My grandmother wears shirts like that," Heidi said, "but without the shoulder pads."

"The shoulder pad thing in shirts ended in the sixties or early seventies, I think."

"I know. But my grandma never wore ones with pads."

My mom had small shoulders that sloped forward very slightly, so I could see why she had liked the shoulder pads. I think most people in her social set wore them during the fifties and sixties. Men had them in their suit jackets and women in many of their blouses and dresses.

The pads and old blouses recalled a time when we were still living on Lee Road. I was very small, maybe only three years old. My parents were having a dinner party and the first floor of our small house was packed with people from the church who were talking and laughing. I was sleeping in a bedroom on the second floor and at some point decided to sneak out of the room and lay at the top of the stairs to watch the party. I positioned myself in a way that allowed me to peek between the posts of the banister toward the people below.

The odor of food and perfume mixed with sounds of glasses tinkling and my parent's guests moving around. It was very hard—impossible—for me to fully understand what was going on. I saw my father smiling and my mom moving around the room offering *hors d'oeuvre* to her guests. For a time, the small crowd of people below fascinated me, but since I understood so little of what they were saying and doing, I eventually fell asleep. I am not sure how long I slept, but I was awakened by my body tumbling down the stairs. I attained a state of reasonable wakefulness at the bottom of the stairs. The guests in our house all exclaimed at the sound of me falling and the sight of a little kid at the bottom of the stairs. As I stood, my mom rushed forward and picked me up. She bundled me in her arms protectively, but also it seemed to conceal me from her guests.

"Oh, let us see him!" one of the women called out.

"He's so cute," said another.

My mom, though, had her own ideas. With a fulsome sense of purpose she rushed me upstairs to my bed, tucked me in, and went back down to her party. "Oh, Julia, let us see him," someone said as she carried me up the stairs.

At the time, the incident must have been significant enough for me to remember it. And it turns out, for others to remember as well. Many years later a friend told me that some of the women at the party—all of whom were from the Scarsvale Congregational Church—thought that they had made a mistake by not speaking with my mom about how she was raising me.

"She seemed ashamed of you," my friend told me. "They never did say anything though because in those days people tended to leave each other alone. They tended to not interfere."

I wonder how it would have been if they had spoken to her. It's conceivable that those women were the same ones who got my mom involved in those sessions that did her so much good forty years later.

When people say infants can't remember anything, I never believe them because I can clearly remember my mom standing over my bassinet before I was eighteen months old. I can date that because I had an operation at eighteen months to fix a congenital hernia. I can clearly remember my mom looking down at me and smiling broadly as I lay in the wicker bassinet. She was having fun and getting me to smile by poking my tummy with her index finger. "Poke!" she would say in motherese. "Poke, poke." With each word, her finger would lightly jab my belly. Since I had a hernia (which no one had yet noticed), her pokes were painful. I remember feeling really stuck as I lay there. I was so small that my entire repertoire of facial expressions included only smiling or crying. It didn't hurt enough to make me cry, so I smiled. Seeing me smile, my mom poked some more. I clearly recall feeling deeply frustrated by my inability to get her to stop, my inability to communicate with her.

Many years later, I saw her do the same poking thing with one of my nephews. I was surprised at how strong my reaction was to seeing that."Mom!" I said, "I used to hate it when you did that to me." I doubt my nephew felt anything but enjoyment, and as I exclaimed I could also see that my mom was really good with him. He was giggling and laughing right along with her.

She stopped and looked at me perplexed. "How could you remember that?" she asked.

"I do," I said. Then I explained to her about how I had only two expressions and no words and found it impossible to communicate with her.

"Well, maybe you do remember," she said. "You had that hernia then."

When I was in sixth grade, my brother and I got a pair of mice. My father build a mouse cage for us out of some old screens that used to hang from the windows of the house before they were replaced with modern storm windows. The cage was pretty large. My dad made it because he said he didn't want to keep the mice in a small enclosure. The problem with that, which I am sure he did not know at the time, is that when mice are kept in large cages they become territorial and fight.

My mom hated the mouse cage, but my dad sided with my brother and me. We kept it at one end of the sun porch where it could be warmed by the radiator. The cage was well-made, but mice are small, so one or the other of them would find a way to get out almost every night. In the morning, I used to look under the radiators on the first floor for the mice because that is where they were most likely to hide.

"Tom, I can't stand these mice any longer!" my mom complained to my dad. My dad just laughed.

"Oh, it's just for a while" he said. "Let them have some fun."

"OK, but don't get any more. Tom, please. This is our home and I can't stand those mice!"

Before long, there were more mice not because my father bought any more but because the pair bred as mice will do. My brother and I were enchanted with the small litter and enjoyed watching them grow up. Once they were grown, though, their idyllic home turned into a war zone. The mice started fighting almost constantly. At first, they just squealed and bit each other, but as time went on, they started killing each other. In addition to searching for escapees in the morning, I might also have to remove a half-eaten mouse that had been killed during the night.

My mom was beside herself with distress over the mice. She was proud of her neat home and greatly disturbed by the mice, and deeply perturbed with my father.

I think my dad saw that my brother and I might learn a valuable lesson by observing the violence and barbarism of the mice. His teaching style was to let you see for yourself, experience it yourself. It took about one month for most of the mice to kill each other.

Near the end only two were left—Theodora, one of the first two mice and the mother of the litter that started fighting, and one member of that litter, whom we had not named. Theodora's original mate, Claudius, had been killed the day before by one of his children.

My brother and I were horrified at what the mice were doing to each other. We did not understand that the large cage was bringing out their violent behavior. My father remained largely silent, though I could tell that he was also bothered by how violent the mice had become. We kept news of their deaths away from my mom so she simply continued not liking the cage without understanding that things were going very badly inside it.

When only two mice were left, I was confident the killing would stop. I simply could not get it out of my head that Theodora's litter had been a strange aberration and that now that only she and one of her children were left, peace and contentment would reign again. I was wrong. One morning soon after Claudius' death, Theodora lay dead in the cage. The other mouse—her offspring—was alive but gravely wounded. I took it upon myself to remove the wounded mouse and set him free in the backyard. I buried Theodora among some hemlock tress that lined our driveway.

My mom was relieved when she learned that the mice were gone and delighted when we removed the cage from the sun porch and disposed of it. I don't think my father ever said anything more about the mice and I doubt my brother and I said anything to each other about them, but inwardly I was greatly disturbed. How could those mice have killed each other? And how could the last one have killed its own mother? It was like some obverse Freudian world of nightmares that, having no explanation credible to me, profoundly disturbed some part of my imagination for years to come. I didn't lose sleep over the mice—or not much—and I never became despondent over them, but that small drama did force me to accept that some vicious truths are as true as ideal ones. In that sense, I guess my father was right to let the experience unfold and then never explain it.

My mom mostly ruled the home and mostly decided what we were going to do, but sometimes my father had his way, as with the mice. And as with our camping trips to California . We drove from Scarsvale to California three times when I was young. In those days, you could pull into any state or national park in the USA and be all but certain of getting a good camping spot for about 50 cents, if it

wasn't free. My mom hated camping, but she put up with it without much complaint. One night when we were in a remote campground in Yellowstone Park, a grizzly bear wandered into our campsite. We had a large green canvas tent that held all of us.

I remember waking that night to the sound of my father making deep grunts. I looked over from where I was lying on the ground to see him hunched at the door of our tent grunting and threatening to lunge toward a massive brown bear that was staring at him from the other side of the screen door. My mom was sitting up with her arms around her knees, watching my dad confront the bear, who minutes before had raided our cooler, which had been left outside. The metal cooler was heavy and well-constructed, but the next morning we saw that the bear had had little trouble tearing the rear hinges off it, popping the the rivets like buttons. My dad was standing in nothing but his boxer shorts, barefoot, and holding a flashlight as he and the bear stared each other down. My mom and I continued to watch him as he grunted from deep within his chest and started forward as if he were going to attack the bear. My mom looked at me and indicated that I should not move. After a while, the bear departed. My dad stood at the tent door for a while and then went to bed. As I fell back to sleep, I could hear my parents talking quietly.

The next morning a park ranger took my dad and me to see the bear, which had been caught in a bear trap later that night. When my father peered into the long trap, which was shaped like a large barrel on its side, I saw a somewhat tender, respectful look of fear and awe come over his face. It was an expression I had never seen before and never would see again. The ranger matched his expression with one that approached chagrin. "We've seen this one before. He's a big one, alright. He will be taken way up north and released. If he comes back again, we may have to kill him."

You might think that that incident would have ended our camping trips, but it didn't. In fact, we stayed a couple more nights in Yellowstone Park before heading north to Glacier National Park. There were no interstate highways—or very few—in those days. We traveled on two-lane roads everywhere. The population of the country was only a bit more than half of what it is today. I have to admit, I miss the way things were. The woods were vast and there was little pollution. There were no franchise restaurants, so if we stopped somewhere for food it was either a small town diner or a roadside picnic table. For the entire trip, my dad let me eat hamburgers and French fries wherever we went to a diner, whether it was breakfast, lunch, or dinner. My mom often protested.

"Tom, I don't think it's good for him to eat hamburgers at every meal," she would say.

"Why not?" my dad answered. "They come with tomato and lettuce, and the beef out here is the best."

I became a hamburger expert that summer and still remember some of those diners and meals today. There was no air-conditioning in the car, so it could get hot. One day, we pulled into a small town out West. My dad had been driving. He told me to come with him and we crossed the street and went into a bar. My father got a tall glass of beer and I had a coke. The thing I remember about that bar is the jukebox was playing Hank Williams. One of the men at the bar leaned down and said to me, "You hear that? That's Hank Williams. He's the best there ever was. Too bad he's gone…" Even I could tell he was drunk, but I'm glad he said that because that kind of music went way into me.

My uncle lived in Marin County, California and his place was our ultimate destination. After we found his street, I remember sitting outside his house in the car listening to a song on the radio that my sister Carol insisted we let play to the end. I'm pretty sure the song was *Runaround Sue* by Dion And The

Belmonts. I liked the tune and remember looking around the quiet street as it played. Pink and blue houses, crushed stones, flat roofs, brilliant sun. My mom and dad both looked tired, but happy to be at my father's brother's home.

My uncle, who was a radiologist, fascinated me because he always seemed very happy and because he was my father's brother. He was short compared to my father, but since he was older, my dad somewhat deferred to him. He was a good outdoor cook and bought me a knife in San Francisco's Chinatown, which I greatly appreciated because he could tell just by the way I was looking at it that I wanted it.

My mom and my uncle's wife, Aunt Clara, were close enough friends that they spoke on the phone from time to time during those years. Aunt Clara stayed with us on many nights in a beach house we rented on Monterey Bay for a month that summer. During that month, my father flew back to New York to work.

While he was gone, we went to the beach almost every day. During the heat of the day, my mom and Aunt Clara would take us to Carmel or Monterey to look at the shops. One day, when Aunt Clara had gone back to her place in Marin County, a guy name Bud appeared on the beach and started talking to my mom. Then he came again the next day. And then again on the next day. Even I could tell that there was something wrong with him showing up every day and my mom acting a little silly around him. Sometimes I ignored Bud and my mom and sometimes I watched them closely. One day, with my mom protesting loudly, Bud picked her up and started running down the beach holding her like a kid in his arms. He was strong and fit, so there was little my mom could do to get away, assuming she wanted to. I was very disturbed by the sight of Bud running away with my mom in his arms. Eventually he turned around and ran back to deposit her on our beach blanket again. She got quite huffy and told Bud he shouldn't have done that, that "it wasn't right." He looked mildly forlorn and left as she scowled after him. Though we never went back to that beach again or saw Bud again, I was not happy with my mom. My reasoning was why had you talked to him so much? And how could he have gotten the idea that he could pick you up like that? I felt very bad for my father because, small as I was, I knew my mom should not be floating down the beach in some other guy's arms.

I am sure my mom was able to perceive some of my feelings. She tried to explain to me that she was just being friendly and had never thought that Bud would do anything like that. The incident put a shadow in me, but I did get over it and never mentioned it to my father. Many years later, I saw my mom engage in what was probably a similar sort of flirting behavior with a man who came to our house on Circle Road to sand and stain the dining room floor. She didn't do anything bad, but acted a little silly and teased the man, who was quite good-looking, in a way that seemed wrong to me at the time. I guess she knew how to be attractive and playful with members of the opposite sex and was not able—or didn't want—to keep that part of herself always in check.

A couple of years after the California trip, I met a boy who had moved in with his grandfather a few houses away from us on Circle Road. I didn't know it at the time, but it turns out he was the same boy who had stolen my pocket knife four or five years before. He was older than me and much bigger, but I did not have any friends in the neighborhood so I wanted to hang out with him. One day while we were standing in his front yard he asked me, "Do you know where your solar plexus is?" I said I didn't, after which he punched me with great force in my solar plexus. It was probably the most painful thing I had ever experienced. After I got my breath back, I went home and told my mom what had happened. This was the last time I ever told her anything like that. All she said to me was, "Why didn't you hit him back?" Then she turned and walked away.

Sometimes I couldn't sleep at night and would go downstairs to tell my mom. She would usually get up and say, "Let me see what I can do." Then she would climb the stairs to my bedroom on the third floor and take a look at my bed as if analyzing it for the problem. "I think we just need to straighten these sheets and blankets and fluff your pillow." Then she would do it and watch me climb into the newly made bed. I always fell asleep very quickly after that. She did that for me several times when I was around eight or nine years old. Once I went downstairs and told my father I couldn't sleep, hoping for a similar response from him. But he just looked at me over his reading glasses and said coolly, "What do you expect me to do about it?"

My mom used to make me go to bed very early and that must have been part of the reason I couldn't sleep. Many were the nights when I lay in bed fully awake and listening as one person after another made their way to their bedrooms. My dad was always the last to go upstairs. He would change quickly, brush his teeth, and start snoring within ten minutes of my hearing him climb the stairs. He often snored so loudly, you could hear him out in the street.

One night when I was in high school, I was upstairs reading when I heard the doorbell ring. I didn't think much of it when I heard my father get up to answer the door. Some minutes later, he called me downstairs and said that some of my friends from high school had come to the door.

"They did?" I asked. "Who was it?"

He mentioned a few Biblical names and then claimed that one of the girls had been smoking a cigarette, a habit he deeply disapproved of. "I told them you were studying and that this was no time for socializing."

I imagined my dad being stern with them. At school the next day I learned that he had indeed been very stern and seemed mean. "I guess it was our fault because one of us had palmed a cigarette. If you had been Jewish, I don't think we would have done that, honestly. But if your dad was Jewish he would have greeted us in a friendly way!"

What could I say? My dad could be a stern person and he was concerned with our schooling and studying though he almost never asked me anything about school or checked up on whether I was doing my homework, which I almost never did. If you think about the scene for a moment you can imagine the massive clash of values that happened on our front stoop that evening.

My mom surely heard about it and the incident may even have contributed to my being sent to Wosta Academy a year or two later. Both of my parents were against smoking cigarettes or anything else. "Stupidest habit in the world," they would say with real feeling. In that, they were entirely right, though at the time I did not listen to them.

I often smoked cigarettes in the bathroom on the third floor or when I went outside. I thought I was getting away with it, but it's more likely that my parents just stopped saying anything to me about it. Their strong tendency to not discuss anything at length affected the way they raised me. For example, they told me several times to stop smoking, but they never explained why I should stop.

Years later when I was in college, there was a short period of time—a few days—when I was home alone at Circle Road. I didn't feel bad during that period, but I drank a good deal of my mom's scotch and did not clean up the kitchen. My plan was to clean up the house and get her another bottle of scotch the night before they were scheduled to return. Well, they came back a day early in the middle of the

afternoon. I was fairly plowed. A bottle of scotch was standing on the kitchen table surround by dirty plates and uneaten food. They came in the front door so quietly, I was completely surprised by them as I lounged back in one of our kitchen chairs, drink in hand.

I was profoundly embarrassed and expected to get the lecture of my life, but neither of my parents said a word to me. My dad looked around the room with concern and my mom just set to work cleaning up my mess. I tried to help her but she calmly brushed me off. I told her I would get her another bottle of scotch, but she said, "Don't worry. It doesn't matter."

I left the room and went upstairs for a few hours. When I came down for dinner, I was sure one of them would say something, but neither of them ever mentioned the incident again. When they came in the house quietly, I don't think they were sneaking in. You could enter the front door of that house without being heard in the kitchen, especially if the person in the kitchen were mildly drunk and thinking of other things.

Once when I was in eighth or ninth grade, my father booked a stay at Grossinger's Inn. When the father of one of my friends learned where we were going, he said to me, "You can't go there. That place is only for Jewish people."

I had no idea what he meant or why he would even say something like that. In those days, though, places like that were effectively completely segregated. A non-Jew could book a room, but we were not made to feel welcome. What happened was one of the hotel staff asked my dad if any of us wanted to drink milk with our meal. My father without giving it any thought said, "Yes, maybe." I quit drinking milk when I was ten, but my brother still did drink it. Anyway, the incident seemed like nothing to either of my parents. When dinner time approached, though, we were informed that we would be served during "the early shift." We went down to the dining hall at the time we were told to be there, probably about five o'clock. We were met at the door and escorted to a small screened-off section with a single table in it. I did not care where we sat and was even glad we would not have to see a lot of people, but my parents were beyond mortified with embarrassment. My mom looked at my dad and he looked at her. Neither of them had the slightest idea what to do.

When the waitress returned—and she was an ordinary blue-collar type with strong hands and a weary expression—my dad asked her why we had been seated behind the screens in this tiny area.

She replied, "It's because you want to drink milk with your meal."

"Oh, for God's sake," my father said. "We don't care about that. That was a trick to ask us that."

The waitress looked uncomfortable but said there was nothing she could do. My mom put her hand on my dad's forearm and said, "Tom…"

I guess she could see he was getting angry. We all could see that the waitress was not to blame, so we said no more and took our dinner in that small screened-off area. An extra bit of weirdness was no one was in the large dining room at the time. When we left after our meal, there was no one anywhere in the dining room or in the hall leading away from it.

Later, upstairs in our room, my father expressed some anger and directed some of it at me, complaining about how my hair was combed. My mom again said, "Tom…" and he stopped fuming. The incident did not bother me much at all, but I think it was deeply offensive to my father and probably to some extent to my mom. I wonder if she thought of Fishburn and his mom and being jilted by some jerk who wrote "PS: you're a great kid!"

My dad was an adventurer, so rather than leave in shame or anger, he decided to stay for the full two nights we had booked. The next day we skied on the hotel's small slope. The same friend who had stood to the side and watched the attack against me at Saxon Woods Pool and years later offered me a ride on New Year's Eve after I left Barbara's was there with the twins who had actually done the fighting at the pool. In those days, he was a sort of youthful don to the twins, who were always willing to do whatever he asked. We spoke briefly in the lobby but it was awkward. He asked me flat out. "What are you doing *here*?"

That night I went with my parents to listen to Jackie Mason do a stand-up routine. I doubt I understood most of his jokes, but I well remember the low, solemn laughter of the audience whose response sounded, to my ears, knowing and reserved.

The second mysterious stranger, the Jewish one, told me it was very bad for me to have seen Jackie Mason that night. "You probably heard a lot of Jewish jokes that weren't good for you to hear. It made you think you can say things you shouldn't say."

A year or two later, I went to a camp in the Adirondack Mountains. I had a great time. When camp was over, the person who was giving us a ride home was supposed to arrive at the camp at eleven or twelve.

My mom, who was picking me up, did not arrive until three in the afternoon. I remember feeling quite depressed as the camp emptied of all my friends. To console myself, I went into the shower room and stood under a stream of water for so long, I depleted the entire contents of the hot water tank or someone turned it off. I must have stood there for two hours at least. Once or twice someone looked in on me, but no one said anything. I didn't feel deeply horrible but it was a lonely feeling to wait so long for my mom when I knew she had to have known the right time to arrive.

When she did appear at last, some of the camp staff, who had been forced to wait for her, complained. But she breezily said she had not gotten the time right. It was one of those times when I knew for certain that my mom was lying and being an asshole, though I had no idea why and still don't.

In the car, after we had driven for a while, she said to me, "Tommy, your father and I have decided that you should go to a private school."

I was dumbfounded, thunderstruck, speechless. My mom looked at me to judge my reaction and waited about thirty seconds for me to reply. I was so surprised by her words that I just sat there saying nothing.

"Well, then. I guess that's decided," she said, turning to face the highway ahead. As usual, I had no idea how to stick up for myself, how to take control of my own fate.

In one of our conversations at the Chinese restaurant when my mom was much older and had already expressed feelings of guilt for having sent me to Wosta Academy, she told me that when she had been younger she had not known that people can and do speak at length about emotional and personal matters.

"I just didn't know that anyone talked that way," she said.

I know that her statement was the result of her sessions with her friends, but what had prompted it was me asking her why she had never engaged in a real conversation with me when I went to the kitchen day after day when I was twelve to tell her about whatever book I was reading.

"Well, I had a tendency to gather wool," she said at first when I asked. She waved her hand around her head and acted slightly dazed as she said "gather wool."

"That's bull," I said. "You weren't 'gathering wool', you just were not paying any attention."

"I suppose…" she admitted. "Why did I do that?"

"I don't know," I said. "We could have talked about all kinds of things."

"I'm sorry, Tommy. I just didn't know that anyone talked that way."

I did believe her when she said that and I still believe her now. She had never seen or learned the power of speech to describe, to explore, to invent, to explain. It seems tragic to me, but I know many people in this world—even wealthy and well-educated people—have no idea of the power of words. And even many of those who *think* they do are sorely restricted by conventional avenues of thought or fear of saying something off-beat.

As I have worked on this volume, my understanding of my mom has improved. I have mentioned that you could put her in the category of an "abusive" parent if you squeezed pretty hard. And you can understand a lot about her if you understand that she had a role-based comprehension of life, or that she had fairly rigid or static mental categories that predefined much of what she experienced.

Another way to understand her, though, is through the concept of neoteny. *Neoteny* is the preservation of juvenile features in adults. It is generally believed that human large heads, small jaws, hairlessness, and other features evolved neotenically; that they at one time existed only in children. The concept of neoteny can also be applied to culture. All cultures have some neotenic features, such as cuteness, tender smiling, sweet tones of voice, and so on. Cultures can also retain the childish traits of excessive complaining, throwing tantrums, selfish stubbornness, and more.

What defines my mom in this context—actually both of my parents—is that neither of them virtually ever exhibited any kind of significant neotenic cultural behaviors, especially around their children. Neither of them complained, acted cute, or smiled very much around us, and neither of them rewarded, or even tolerated, any of those behaviors in us. My mom was a stoical, hard-working, non-neotenic, taciturn, exponent of an old-style northern European culture, strains of which may still exist today in some areas.

Cultures of this type tend to be sober, orderly, quiet, and deeply critical of people who do not act that way. Thus, my mom very likely saw my talking to her in the kitchen as a waste of time, as jabbering, as not being serious or sober enough, as being childish. It was hard for her to engage in my juvenile understanding of her, of books, of the world.

For much of my mom's life in America, people of eastern European lineages were looked down on by people with northwestern European lineages. I can easily understand how this came to be—the USA was largely built by people from northwestern Europe. The language, laws, political, and cultural institutions of this country are all fundamentally of northwestern European origin. When I was young, during the height of the Cold War, it was not uncommon to hear people complain of Russian or eastern European "barbarism." My father changed his name to avoid the stigma and my mom all but completely ignored her own background, sharing little of it with her children even after we became adults. She would answer direct questions without being evasive but otherwise had little to say on the subject of her childhood or her understanding of how her parents had grown up, what their psychological circumstances had been.

I think there is some validity to saying that people like my mom and dad *were* barbarians. They were barbarians in the sense that they came from an area with a long history of war. Unlike the British Isles or Scandinavia, Lithuania was an almost constant theater of war. If they were not fighting Vikings, Russians, Germans, Swedes, Danes, or Teutonic knights, the population suffered exploitation from its own "noble" classes. My grandparents left the region to avoid being conscripted into the Russian army; in the USA, they were part of a very small Polish-Lithuanian community that was not used to networking and that had no political power.

My parents moved away from that community in Wosta to try their luck in suburban, white-collar New York. They were able to look the part and act it up to a point. But they had none of the support system that goes with being "civilized."

They were an atomized, marginalized pair that tried to replace their cultural vacuum with standard American ambitions for status, good looks, and money. In a general sense, theirs was a common story. It was a barbaric story because it gave them no means to speak truthfully to anyone but each other. My mom did not talk to me when I was a young teen because she had nothing to say to me, or thought she had nothing to say. She had no sense of a culture—an ethos, beliefs, values—to share with me. She—barbarically—thought America *was* its institutions and that since I was more of a child of those institutions than she had been, there was nothing she could add, or dare add.

When she sat alone with my father in the kitchen, I could often hear them talking away in tones too low to be heard from another room. I wish I knew what they were saying. I wish I had asked her before she became senile *what were you saying to each other? Why didn't you include me in your conversations?*

Much later in her life, my mom proved to me conclusively that she was not and never had been a real barbarian. As she had put it, she "just didn't know that people talked that way." Her ability to change so quickly and deeply at such an advanced age shows that she had the capacity for real communication and real thought all along.

If my parents were barbarians, of course, I was one too. Certainly, as a youth, I was seen as one by many people in Scarsvale. I probably still am thought of that way today by many of those same people, at least to the extent that any of them thinks of me at all. But what is their "civilization" but a network of favors and falsehoods? Remove the money, the nice clothes, the dental work and shibboleths and they don't know how to speak the truth either. From Boy Scouts, to church groups, to sports teams, to doctors, to classes at school, many of those "civilized" people acted with far more barbarism than my overburdened and misfit mom and dad. That said, I do with great feeling and appreciation bow deeply to whoever those wonderful women were who helped my mom, and me, by giving her the opportunity to at last explore her mind. They truly were civilized in the best sense of the word.

Chapter Thirty-six

"A very considerate, all-inclusive person. That's my Tommy," my mom said to me one morning as I went in to her bedroom to say hello.

"You look cheerful today," I said.

"Oh, I hope so," she replied. "I don't want to be a *drizzlebig*. There's too many of those out there. I just want to be in my own home. Perfectly normal."

"You're doing great, mom," I said.

She smiled and asked, "Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do."

Over the previous few weeks, I had been playing with a "chess problem" program on my computer. Just a few minutes before going into my mom's bedroom that morning, I had told Heidi that I had completed 1,000 problems. There was no way my mom could have heard my conversation with Heidi, which had taken place in the kitchen. But the next thing she said was, "Tommy? Do you play *che-, che-, che-,* chestnuts?"

"Do you mean chess?"

" Yes, chess!"

This was one of several instances where she seemed to have a sixth sense. Another one is one day my mom's grandson, my nephew, Tom, came over for a visit. At the time he was having problems with a mild case of eczema on his hands and fingers. We went upstairs to my mom's bedroom to visit with her. As Tom came around the bed and into her view, she held up her good hand, making the OK sign toward him. I told Tom to do as she did. Then my mom started bobbing her hand back and forth, holding it palm up, then down, again and again. As Tom imitated her, she moved her hand toward his, ultimately laying the back of her hand on his open palm. When Tom put out his other hand, she moved her hand to cover that one. Neither one of them said a word. My mom did not cure Tom's eczema, but she had acted in a pointed and very unusual way toward him. On another occasion, after Heidi returned from a friend's wedding, my mom sang a song about a bridesmaid. There were many other occasions when she seemed to be commenting on a conversation Heidi and I had just had out of earshot or on something we had just done outside. I won't say she was being psychic, but who knows what levels of reality an old lady near death can comprehend?

One night around that time as I was playing guitar for her, she asked, "Is my coffin open?"

"What did you say, mom?"

"Is my coffin open?"

"Why did you say that?"

"Because that's where I'm going to sleep tonight."

Then as I played some more, she said, "Oh Tommy, that's so nice. I could just die here."

If we stood in the hall, sometimes we could hear her talking to what we assumed was a doll that sat on a small chair near her bed.

"Oh, I *love* your hat," my mom might say. Or, "Who is your friend? Why not ask her to come forward?"

One night after dinner, my mom said, "I love you" to me.

I said, "I love you, too, mom."

After a pause, she said, "You are so good-looking!"

"That's because I have such a good-looking mom," I replied. She didn't seem to understand what I had said so I repeated my comment.

When she heard it a second time and understood it, she pushed herself up from her slightly reclined position on the bed, spread her arms wide, and bent forward in a deep bow.

"Thank you," she said.

As the months passed, my mom gradually became less attentive to my guitar playing and started forgetting the words to the songs we always sang. We still met every day to share music and she still enjoyed it, but she wasn't as lively as before.

After she had been confined to her bedroom for about six or eight months, she began to make what seemed like a very primitive "gaping mouth" expression, a rictus. She would open her mouth very wide and proffer it toward you as a form of communication. At first, we tried to discourage the expression by ignoring it, but after a week or so we decided that that was where she was at and let it go. The expression was unattractive by normal standards, but as we got used to it we realized it was a very basic configuration of the human face, an atavistic expression, not so dissimilar to ones we can see sometimes on the faces of chimpanzees. I bet human ancestors a million years ago looked like that sometimes.

She also began to call out her children's names less often and to express less pleasure in her fantasies about what she had been doing during the day. Rather than tell me an imaginary story about how she had gone to the village or been out in the garden, she would say instead that she had "done nothing" today.

None of this was particularly sad because at the same time she became even more deeply contented. It was as if since she no longer had any anxieties, she no longer needed to make up stories about her day or concern herself with where her children were.

Her hallucinations, however, became even more constant. We would see her waving to imaginary people out her window or speaking at length to the doll near her bed. One night, after we had tucked her into her blankets and left her room, we heard her from the hall saying, "Enjoy whatever you're going to do today! Who's the little boy there? What a good handshake! We can sit on the back porch. It's very nice out there. Whatever you want to do, have fun! Who's that right there? Is that Tommy? Why doesn't your friend come down and stay for a few days? Yeah, that would be lovely!" She could go on like this for quite a long time.

She often talked about "going home," which I assume meant her childhood home on Houghton Street in Wosta. I am not intimately familiar with her old neighborhood, but it was not far from Wosta Academy or my dad's old neighborhood on Canton Street, which I know better. The city of Wosta is built in and among a group of hills. During my parents' childhoods, it was a mill town that employed many workers who typically lived in "triple-decker" tenements. The city was mostly run by Irish-Americans who had got there first. In my parents day, roughly fifty percent of the city's school teachers were of Irish extraction. Both of my parents attended Classical High School, where they knew each other but did not date, to the best of my knowledge.

My mom's father was a cook, as mentioned. My mom told me that her father's brother stayed with them for a time. She said she remembered the brother as a drinker who sometimes fought with her father. At some point he up and left Wosta to move to California, never to be heard from again. My mom took secretarial courses at Northeastern and during the war was admitted to the program that turned her into

one of America's first female lawyers. Her brother became an engineer. He lived in Buffalo, New York. When I was young, we visited him and his family every year at Christmas. As we got older, I think there was a little sexual attraction between me and my extremely beautiful cousin, Janine. I am pretty sure that the attraction bothered my mom and led to her ending our trips to Buffalo. The last time we were there, I remember her brother saying to her, "Oh, Julia… you are always like that. It's nothing. They're just children. It's perfectly normal…" I may have the subject of that quote wrong, but I think he was referring to something my mom had said about me and my cousin. I liked my uncle very much, but never saw him again.

My uncle is in the photo of my grandfather mentioned earlier in this volume. He is in a little sailor's suit standing beside his sister, my mom.

"Tommy, turn on the radio, please," my mom said one evening a she sat on the side of her bed.

I assumed she wanted me to play the guitar so I went to get it, came back, and started strumming, to which my mom only said, "Tommy, please, *please* turn on the radio!"

I figured she must mean the light since she never listened to the radio. I got up and turned on a second light that hung from the ceiling and made her room much brighter.

"There…" she said as the light went on.

I said, teasing her, "So, I come in here to see you and play music for you and all you do is tell me to turn on the radio?"

My mom fully understood my tone and intent. "Well, good afternoon, Mr. Beldervest and how are you today?" she said stiffly, mocking me in return.

Later she said, "I love the moon."

"You love the moon?" I asked.

"Yup."

"I like it, too," I said.

"I love you."

"I love you, too, mom."

I doubt my mom's mom ever told my mom she loved her. My mom described her mother as gloomy whenever I had asked about her in the past. "She didn't talk much and she often seemed gloomy," my mom said one day as we were sitting in the kitchen after she had started her sessions with her friends.

I remember telling her, "That's how you often seemed to me."

"I *did?*" she replied. "I wasn't gloomy."

"Maybe when you got in your car and drove off somewhere, you weren't, but you were often kind of gloomy at home it seemed to me," I said.

"Maybe I was," she replied. "I guess I was always trying to keep things in order, keep them running along smoothly. Maybe I was too focused on practical matters."

"Well, you did do a good job with that. We always ate well and had clean clothes to wear."

"It wasn't enough, was it?" she said. "You need all the brain power and all the help you can get in this world. It's very competitive. Instead of sending you to Gurney's Inn to wash dishes, I should have sent you to do something really interesting."

"Probably, but that was actually a good experience," I said.

"It was too raw, too unstructured… Sometimes it seems as if I were deliberately trying to make you see how hard life is. I don't know why I did that… Maybe it was because of Wosta. It's a hard town and you learn a lot of bad things about people in a place like that. I don't know *why* I allowed you to be sent to Wosta Academy…"

"Neither do I…"

"Do you remember your Aunt Louise?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"Do you remember visiting her at her place in Wosta?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"Tell me what happened," she asked.

"Well, I was quite young, but I do remember. We used to go to her place and you would go inside first. Then you would come outside and call us in. Once we got inside, you always told us to go sit in the living room."

"Did you ever see her?"

"No, I don't think we did. You said she had a disease or something. I think you mentioned booze once."

"If anyone had ever tried to do that with me," my mom said in an angry whisper, recalling the past. "I am so ashamed of myself, I can't even understand it… but I used to *make* her go into a side room and wait because I didn't want you to see her drunk. But she didn't even drink that much! And she was never drunk when we went over, or maybe she was a little tipsy once or twice… Oh, I just feel terrible. How could I have done that? She was a wonderful woman and it would have done you a world of good to see her. She *was* a bit eccentric, but she was also brilliant. And when she died she left all of her property to me. Do you remember her car?"

"Sort of," I said. "It was a really old classic from the 1930s at least."

"That's right, it was a Packard. After she died, do you know… I *paid* someone to take the car away. It still ran and was worth a lot of money, but I *paid* someone to take it away. I feel like an idiot! I don't know why I did that. I should have brought it home and given it to *you*. You would have loved it and it would been a big hit with your friends."

"You *paid* someone…?"

"Yes! Can you believe that? It's Wosta. Some of those people are so sharp they know how to fool you in any situation. He seemed like a kind of simple old man who complained about what a piece of junk the car was and how was he supposed to get it out of there… He said, 'I can't give you any money for this junk. But I'll take it away for $20. Maybe we can use the parts.'… I actually *paid* him. He went into the garage and started it right up. Then he drove away with it… That's Wosta, Tommy. It's a rough town and you have to watch everything you do…"

"Sounds a little like China," I said.

"I guess that's how a lot of the world is," she said. I felt very sorry for my mom after that conversation. I could see that she deeply regretted treating her aunt that way. At that point in her life—she was maybe 83 or 84—she was fully aware that many of her attitudes and behaviors had robbed her children of fundamental life experiences. I think she was also ashamed of being ashamed of her own people, of their beliefs and ways. For my part, I was grateful that she was speaking to me about herself and I was extremely respectful of her being able to criticize herself. The change that came over her in her early eighties was truly amazing. She went from being, as I sometimes described her in my own mind, a wooden person or a pile of bricks to being a thoughtful and caring human being who was able to analyze and criticize her own self. In Buddhism, the greatest emotion, the most important emotion, is a sense of shame. With a sense of shame, anything is possible. Without it, nothing is.

One night in October, Heidi and I heard a noise at about 2:30 AM that sounded like she was trying to get out of bed. We rushed downstairs and heard her talking.

"Thirty-five cents," she said loudly. "Just give it to me. I'll come pick it up tomorrow. Thirty-five cents… But I'm losing 50 cents. Gee whiz, this is terrible. This is no way to run a business."

I turned on the light.

"Where are you, mom?" I asked.

"The theater… I want to go home. I need to go to bed now… I want to go to my home on Houghton Street. I have to go to bed now…"

Clearly she was in a REM state.

"Please give me a hand and we can go up the stairs to bed together. Somebody give me a hand."

With some coaxing, we were able to get her to move to the other side of the bed where we tucked her in. We listened from the hall as she continued saying she needed to get to Houghton Street. Before long, she started mumbling her words as she drifted back to sleep.

Chapter Thirty-seven

"Tommy, make a magic circle," my mom said to me one winter morning.

Not certain what she meant, I waved my hand in a wide circle over the floor in front of her.

"I knew you could make a good one!" she said, delighted with the magic circle that she seemed able to see hovering beside her bed. When I told Heidi of this incident, she said that she had just been reading about *magic circles* in crocheting, which she was learning to do.

"That's another one," I said, referring to my mom's apparent sixth-sense.

The saddest thing for me about the way I think the world was for much of my mom's life is it was very hard, often impossible, to take back what you said, to revise your views, to change beliefs, to erase from other people's minds incidents of stupid behavior or misunderstanding. Language and culture bring people together and allow them to interact, but with cruel irony their simple forms also prevent people from knowing each other deeply. The square dance party she gave for our neighbors on Circle Road is an example. She made the mistake of assuming people would want to have fun in that way, and then compounded her mistake by hiring a caller who was not very skilled or sensitive about what he did. Rather than enjoy an hour in my mom's backyard, our neighbors abandoned her to dispose of the surplus food, pay the caller, and console herself alone. I wish I could have drawn a magic circle on that day to save my mom from that humiliation. I know people can still be mean today, but it was worse back then. There was a great deal of narrow-mindedness and shittiness about anyone who was different.

On another occasion, my grandma visited us on Circle Road. As mentioned, I adored her and accompanied her pretty much wherever she went while she was staying with us. One afternoon we were standing in the driveway looking at some peonies when a boy in the neighborhood walked past on the street. I could tell he was startled by the sight of her long skirts, her shawl, and the kerchief over her head. He was a friend of mine, so I sort of expected him to say something the next time I saw him, which he did.

"Who was that woman?" he asked. "Is she related to you?"

From his tone, I could tell my status with him and his mother would decline if I told him the truth. I briefly contemplated lying to him, but could not deny my grandmother no matter what he or his mom might think.

"She's my grandmother," I said. "My father's mother."

The look of glee on his face confirmed my fears that he was going to tell his mom that my grandmother was "one of those people," as I had heard his mother refer to people like her.

I wish I could draw a magic circle around that day, too. But maybe my grandmother did it for me. After my friend had passed on the street, and possibly because she sensed something in my expression, she looked up at our house and said, "Too big. It's too big. You don't need to have a house so big." Then she snapped off a peony flower and handed it to me.

My mom had a natural exuberance that carried her—body and mind—into more gaffs than the square dance. When I was in elementary school I played basketball on an extracurricular team. I used to practice with a hoop my father had set up above our garage door. Since my mom often saw me practicing in the driveway, she must have thought it would be a good idea for her to go to some of my games to cheer me on. Well, the thing was she was the *only* spectator who attended the games. I don't know why, but none of the other parents ever came to our games. No one came.

True to form—some form that existed in her own mind only—my mom sat alone in the small green bleachers beside the basketball court and cheered loudly whenever my team got the ball. Since the games were held inside, her cheering was quite loud and sometimes was accompanied by her stamping her feet. She stood out so much that our coach told her after a couple of games, "These are supposed to be low-key games, friendly games. These kids are very small and we don't think there should be so much cheering." I think I was in third-grade.

My mom told me that story when she was in her eighties. When she told me, I just laughed. I clearly remembered her showing up at a couple of our games, but then stopping and never going to one again.

By this time, we had had many conversations about the past and I was getting used to her admissions. "That's hilarious, mom," I said, trying to relieve her of her evident embarrassment. "Who cares what that guy thought? But, you know, it was kind of strange the way you cheered so much when you were the only spectator present."

"I wanted to show my support for you and your team," she replied, still looking embarrassed but also seeing the humor in that incident, now long past.

There had been a sort of magic in her mind when she went to those basketball games or threw a square dance in our backyard. Though she had not been "appropriate" to the standards of the day, she had seen something wonderful and tried to bring it into being. I laughed again and reminded her that she used to take my brother and me bowling after those games.

"Yes, I remember," she said. "Did you enjoy that?"

"We enjoyed every minute of it," I said.

"I'm glad," she replied.

She had attacked the bowling lanes and her attempt to be a friend to my brother and me with a magical enthusiasm that was not dissimilar to what she had shown at the square dance or the basketball court. She meant well, but was more energetic, more magical, than others could comport with. I enjoyed bowling with her, but found it hard to share her enthusiasm, to participate in it. I know several Chinese who glow with an enthusiasm similar to my mom's and who are dynamic speakers with a strong theatrical sense. Whenever I have asked them what they are thinking when they act in those ways, they always reply in the same way—I am trying to *show* the spirit of the subject to others. I am trying to *show* them what I mean. Though I never asked my mom what she thought at those times, I suppose it's a fair guess that she was doing something similar. She wanted to *show* us how she felt, how to bowl, how to be at a game. She wanted to display an exuberant spirit to inspire us.

Her style didn't always fit well in Scarsvale in those days, and even I did not understand it until many years later. For the most part, you had one chance to be misinterpreted in Scarsvale and that was it. You couldn't take it back while it still mattered. Without realizing it, my mom violated cultural rules that she did not understand. Mountebank had used her enthusiasm to dupe her. She had deliberately mimicked my mom's glowing smiles and magical thoughts about what should be done with my eye.

When the subject of Mountebank came up a second time during our conversations when my mom was old, she reminded me again that she had taken me to her office in White Plains.

"I can't believe I did that," she said. "I knew she had harmed you, but I took you there anyway. I think I partly just wanted to see for myself what she was like again. But… I also felt like it was a dream, like I was dreaming."

"I remember that day. I asked her if my eye would be able to handle reading so much Chinese. She said it was fine and I should have no problems. Boy, was she wrong."

"I remember hearing her tell one of her other patients in a different room that you had far worse problems than her. But why did you have problems? You were fine when I first brought you to her… *Why* did I believe her?"

As I recall the awful tension I felt that day in Mountebank's office, I remember something the second mysterious stranger had said to me. Believe it or not, he said, "You should have killed her… If you had, it would have been one of the greatest acts any human being…"

"Are you serious?" I asked him. "I would have gone to jail and no one would have sympathized with me."

"They would have. People knew…"

"Tommy, did you know that a nurse called me up two days before your operation?" my mom asked.

"No I didn't. What did she say?"

"I think it was the same nurse that came to your room after the operation."

"I remember her. She sat on the windowsill and said 'that's what he has become now' when I couldn't walk to the bathroom without getting sick and collapsing."

"Oh, Tommy… You were so sick…," my mom said.

"What did the nurse say on the phone?" I asked.

"She said that I should not let her do that operation. That she was a bad doctor, an evil person. But I didn't listen! Can you believe that? I told her we were going to do it and that's that."

I just looked at her in amazement, recalling some of the terror.

"Tommy, it's even worse than that. The nurse called me a second time. The next night, she tried again to get me to call it off. But I only got mad at *her*. Was I crazy? Was I insane? I don't know… Why didn't I listen?"

"I don't know, mom. You trusted doctors, I guess."

"Do you remember that nurse when she was in the room? Do you remember her saying, 'Where is she? Why isn't she *here*? What kind of doctor does not check on their patient after an operation?'"

"Yes, I remember," I said. The nurse was a mix of anger, contempt, righteousness, and resignation. "It's God's will," she had said at last.

I never saw Mountebank again until the time in White Plains described above, years after the operation.

"She never checked up on you," my mom said. "I wish I had had the courage to take you to that other doctor we had been seeing. He would have known what to do… But I was too embarrassed. I was ashamed. He had been right all along. He said you didn't need any operation."

"Mom, why didn't you get a second opinion?" I asked.

"Mountebank *was* the second opinion!"

"Oh jeez, that's crazy…"

The mysterious stranger had told me that Mountebank didn't want to see me again because seeing me would make her feel bad. "That's how people like that are. They fuck you up, but it makes them feel a little guilty, so they don't want to see you anymore."

Chapter Thirty-eight

"I'm going to miss all of you. Every one of you."

"What do you mean by that, mom?"

"Just what I said."

Later, she said, "I feel dumb, dumb, dumb! I'm lost. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Well, mom, where are you?" I asked that because she often said she felt dumb when she forgot where she was.

"I'm in the City Hall."

"Where's that?"

"New York City."

"What room are you in?"

"The Spirit Room."

Sometime later she said, "There's somebody in the doorway."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"My brother, I guess."

"What's he doing?"

"He's dragging through the snowb…nk…"

"The snowbank?"

"Snow*flake*."

My parents announced their engagement in October of 1941, when my mom was twenty-five. They were married in 1942 in New York City. Whenever I asked her to reflect on what she had done before I was born, she often would describe walking around New York City at night during the 1940s. She said the city was beautiful and very safe, so they "walked everywhere." In 1941 my father was attending law school at Fordham, while my mom was studying law at Northeastern. They lived in the city again after the war, before moving to Scarsvale.

As I write about my mom now that she is gone, I realize that we lived in very different worlds when I was a child. When I was a boy and later, a teen, I thought that my mom had different sensibilities from me because she had grown up in Massachusetts while I had grown up in New York.

There is much truth in that, but the deeper truth is that my mom was a contradictory mix of northern European moderation or restraint and a natural desire to break free. But it's not so easy to break free.

A sense of restraint does restrain, and like many kinds of sober wisdom, often does much good.

Did my mom's neighbors really make a fool of her or did she make a fool of herself by not consulting with them before she scheduled the square dance in our driveway?

Restraint implies consensus as well as moderation. Why did she feel OK being the only spectator at my basketball games and the only person cheering? Why did she refuse to listen to the nurse who told her to call off my operation? Isn't it because she had allowed herself her own head, had acted on her own immoderate ideas without seeking the opinions of others?

How would I have behaved had I been one of her neighbors coming down the driveway to a loud square dance caller complaining about people not dancing? Might I not have simply turned around and left as some of them had done? And if she had been at a basketball game I was coaching, would I not also have ignored her for one game, then two, and then said something gently after the third? What could that nurse have thought of a mother who would not even pause to question her own poor judgment?

My mom's core mistake in these matters was not *hubris*, but violation of the down-to-earth moderation that had sustained her forebears and protected them against going too far. I am all but certain that her father and mother figured this is America, we are immigrants, we should let her go her own way and not hold her back. And their plan worked well enough—she did do well in many respects—but it also failed in that she did not have the education or social network around her to allow her to see that her mix of restraint and the desire to break free of it caused her to misunderstand many of life's situations.

She went against her parents' sense of humble moderation not because she was rebelling so much as because she couldn't quite see it. She didn't see that there is wisdom in it. Both of my parents were lone individuals who had stepped beyond the confines of their parents' worlds into a naked New York that had little concern for them.

When she became old and started her sessions with her friends, she was able to quickly learn a "new" culture of deep sharing and mutual consultation that suited her, and me, much better. For this, I can only be profoundly grateful. Grateful to her and to her friends. At the same time, I am amazed at how quickly she changed.

In a few years time, she grew beyond her limited comprehension of moderation, beyond personal ambition, beyond even conformity to a new style of openness, to become, in a Buddhist sense, a fully sentient human being capable of feeling and expressing complex emotions and sharing them with me.

Just today, I read an article about how hard it is to care for a demented parent. I am sure that it can be hard in many cases, but it must be stated that it can also be a wonderful experience.

Guitar in hand, I stood waiting outside her bedroom one afternoon because I could hear her talking and didn't want to disturb her. She could not see me.

"Connie, why don't you come on in here with me? I think it would be fun to have you right here in bed next to me!" she said in a loud clear voice.

Then: "That's a very big light. And a beautiful one. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

I waited a while longer and then entered to play some songs with her.

"Tommy, what are you doing tomorrow?" she asked me as I sat down near her bed.

"Planting potatoes." Heidi and I had prepared a small potato patch.

"What?"

"Planting potatoes, mom. So we'll have potatoes to eat this summer."

"What else?"

"We'll probably do some other work in the garden."

"Oh, you can do more than that!"

Then after a pause, she said, "Just use your imagination. Use your mind to think of what you want to do, what you want to see, and then go do it!"

When I first heard her say things like that after we moved back to Circle Road, I assumed she meant be ambitious in the way she had been. But by this time in her life, I understood her to mean something much deeper and more suited to the way I really was.

As my mom listened and sang along with the guitar, I realized that she was going through another of her energized phases when she would talk a great deal and would probably do REM waking at least one night.

Her face was animated and she seemed to see more in the room than I did.

"Oh, I love that music… That sounds so nice… You play those old songs just as they should be played."

"Thanks, mom. I'm glad you like it."

"Tommy, you don't have to follow anybody. Use your own mind. Think for yourself."

"That's good advice, mom. It's good to hear you say that."

"Yup."

"Where's your brother, Tommy?"

"He's in Binghamton, New York. That's where he works and lives."

"Oh, that's a good place to live."

"Yes it is."

"Well, why doesn't he come down here?"

"Would you like me to ask him to come down?"

"Yes, ask him to come down and visit from time to time. Now, are there any other siblings?"

"Yes, you have a daughter named Carol and a daughter named Mira."

"Oh!" she said, apparently surprised. Then she repeated my exact words, "You have a daughter named Carol and a daughter named Mira…"

That was the first time she had forgotten any of her children, though she had occasionally called one of us the wrong name.

Chapter Thirty-nine

A couple of days after Easter I went into her bedroom to play guitar. As I sat down, my mom asked, "Where's Big Tom?"

"Big Tom" is a nickname for me that is used to distinguish between me and my nephew, who is also named Tom.

"Big Tom? Who do you mean?" I asked, thinking she might be referring to my father.

"My son, Big Tom," she replied.

"Well, that's me, mom."

"You look different."

"Who did you think I am?"

"You're Goldmine," she said with a strange smile.

I let the moment pass and then asked her what she was doing as she seemed to be paying more attention to her bed and blankets than to me or my guitar.

"I'm trying to fix these!" she said, referring to an orderly triangle of blankets she had pulled over her lap and folded neatly.

"Well, they look good to me," I said.

"I'm trying to make them fantastic," she replied.

I started playing and she looked up to watch me but, for the first time, she did not start singing. I didn't say anything to encourage her one way or the other. I just played as she folded and refolded the triangle of blankets on her lap.

From our first days with her on Circle Road, her condition had been marked by fairly regular ups and downs. This is a characteristic of all of life, as well as the life of someone with DLB. As the months and years went by, her energy waned while her cognitive functions changed—she became warmer, more direct, almost mystical in her view of herself and others.

While in a diagnostic sense it could be said that her cognitive functions had been steadily declining, in another sense—perhaps a religious or artistic one—her mental functions can be said to have become more complex. She could no longer walk up the stairs, or go to the store, or even figure out where she was, but she lived within a rich ecology of hallucinated or envisioned beings with whom she frequently interacted.

The antique doll beside her bed was alive to her. Friends gathered beside the doll or floated across the ceiling. Passersby waved to her and smiled. I am sure she saw my father many times, as well as her parents and brother. She often saw people in bed beside her or invited them to come down from the ceiling to join her. Since she had spent the past year entirely on or in her bed, it is not strange at all that she would want people there with her. It was like inviting them into her own little room, the personal space she knew best.

One afternoon, I entered her bedroom and asked, "How are you?"

She replied, "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes, I am," I said.

"Oh, I thought you were talking to the man."

"Which man, mom?"

"The one on the wall over there," she said indicating with her hand a painting of my sister Carol.

Later that night as my mom was lying in bed I heard her say, "Carol, Pep… Climb down from there and turn off this light for me. Just one light. That's *all* you have to do."

I thought it was wonderful the way it seemed so real to her, and for all I know, maybe it was.

A couple of weeks after that, she became very energetic and sang with her old enthusiasm. As we were singing one evening, Heidi came into the room. She asked my mom, "So did you have a good day today?"

"Yes, yes, very good, thank you."

"Me too. It was a pretty warm day. Too warm if you ask me. I don't particularly like the heat," Heidi continued.

"I don't either, I don't either. But for a few weeks every year, it's OK."

My mom smiled as she spoke. For as long as I had known her, she had had a tendency to wilt during the hot months of summer. During the 1950s and 60s, there was no air conditioning in our house. Toward the end of the sixties, my father put an old office air conditioner in the kitchen and that is all my mom ever used after that until she became old and we had one installed in her bedroom. Even with the machine on and her room well-cooled, my mom seemed to sense the heat of summer and become lethargic. Most people die during the winter, but for my mom, summer was the more vulnerable time.

"Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat?" Heidi asked my mom who was still looking at her affectionately.

With that, she raised her clenched fist and shook it vigorously. "I'll eat whatever's necessary," she declared with real determination.

Then she said, "I love this room. Bed, window, sandwiches in the air…"

One day, from the hall I heard my mom ask Heidi, "Wait a minute. Do you come here every day or do you live here?"

"I live here."

"Oh, that's even better! You are such a kind, thoughtful person."

That night as she lay in bed in the dark, I heard her say, "I never know what to make… Some soup, salted fish… There's only going to be four of us… That's plenty, you don't need any more than that… Why don't we make a pitcher of juice or something, before everybody gets here? We don't have to wait… a good German soup…"

Chapter Forty

During the first weeks of June my mom entered a lethargic period during which she was content and responsive but subdued, almost as if she were listening deeply to her inner being rather than reacting to the world or acting upon it. Toward the end of the month, she entered another energetic phase.

It began one afternoon when she repeated the same advice to me three or four times over a span of about ten minutes. Each time she looked deeply at me and spoke clearly and slowly. "Tommy," she said. "Be gracious and merciful all day long." Then she kept her face turned toward me for a long time. Her manner was more grave than usual, so I remained silent and simply nodded in reply, holding her gaze. After a few minutes, she turned toward me again and repeated the same phrase: "Be gracious and merciful all day long." With long silences between her words, her advice sounded like an invocation or a prayer that came from beyond her and beyond the room. "Be gracious and merciful all day long," she said for the last time.

"I will, mom. I'll try."

In response she nodded meaningfully and looked solemnly toward the table set before her window to the world outside.

That evening when I returned to play guitar for her, she was lying down across her bed on her back. It was clear that she had allowed herself to fall backward from a seated position. Her feet were near the floor, her legs bent at the knee. Her face was animated. In the previous few weeks she had sometimes taken that position while I played. Her blankets were slightly tangled and her pillows rumpled against the back of her bed.

As I played for her, she held her eyes shut and waved her arms above her head in a very free and expressive fashion. At one point she said, "There is nothing which is guiding us."

After awhile, she said, "Tommy, I *love* to hear you play that! Keep playing… Play some more!"

She said that a few more times while continuing to wave her arms over her head. And then she said, "Tommy, you should get another gasoline."

"You mean, *another* gasoline?" I asked.

"Yeah, get *another* gasoline," she said firmly.

"That's a good idea."

"Yeah, it is. And then you can play it and play it and play it. It's good."

We continued for a long time, doing each of her favorite songs several times apiece. I got caught up in her mood and probably played as well as I am able. That evening was surely one of the best song sessions we had ever had. My mom sang with deep feeling and very beautifully. It was a real trip to watch her waving her arms and swaying her body as she sang toward the ceiling or just listened to me play.

After I left her bedroom and went downstairs, Heidi took some notes on what I was saying about my mom's singing. She wrote that I had said that it was "her best night ever" and that she manifested a "soulful, solid existence" with her song. That there was "no artifice" and that "she wasn't just *open* to experience, she *was* experience."

My mom died about a month later, during a hot spell in August. She remained alert and contented almost to the end. On the day of her death, my nephew and niece—her grandchildren—"coincidentally" stopped by to see her. With her good hand she gripped them both and clearly knew who they were. Though she was not able to speak on her last day and had some trouble breathing, she did not appear to be in pain.

Epilogue

A few years have passed since her death as I write this. I still miss her and sometimes feel her around me.

Her ability to change and then speak with me about it made a huge difference in both of our lives.

It shows that the human capacity for deep transformation lasts to the end of life and that, above all, it mattered to her. That gave me hope because why should it have mattered to her?

One of my mom's verses that I liked went:

Bless my son both near and far

Help him find a good guitar

I love playing guitar and loved playing it for my mom so many times. We must have played and sung together well over one thousand times while living on Circle Road.

Guitar is a good instrument for me, a good thing for me. I have essentially no musical talent but still derive great pleasure from playing music. The only person I have ever performed for is my mom when she was old. And the only person who could possibly have enjoyed my playing was also my senile old mom.

The guitar brought us together. Her blessing for me even included my finding "a good guitar."

When I apologize for playing so much or for buying a new guitar, Heidi always says "you're just doing what your mom asked you to do."

I frequently play the tunes she used to sing and have made them the foundation of what little improvisation I am capable of.

"Keep playing," she said. "Play and play and play every day. Enjoy yourself and play what you have inside."

I do that.

And I don't feel like a slave anymore.

Heidi has pushed me away from that position as has my mom. Even if I did have a slave-mentality, there's nothing wrong with that. Having the patience and forbearance of a slave is not a bad thing. What's inborn in us is only a foundation. What we do with it matters much more.

I have not and will not seek revenge. It is not in my power to do more than that.

Besides, I can't. You need a story to seek revenge. And you have to be stupid enough to believe it and I am not that dumb.

I do not have the power to forgive.

I do not have the power to expiate the sins of others, but if I did I would if they stop.

I think my mom would agree with that.

There often arises a simple backward explanation for trauma or crackup. To someone who knew me sort of well but not well enough and who is attracted to simple explanations, my trials probably have seemed like character defects caused by bad genes and parenting when the better explanation is Mountebank and the shitheads.

As for my mom, there is no single explanation or simple thing to say about her. She did her best. She probably had difficulties similar to mine though I don't know the scale or how it affected her.

At the end of her life, she became a magnificent talker. Her dad was a talker as was my father's mom, the only grandparent I knew well.

My grandma used to wait by the living room window for her friend to come out of her house and sit on a bench in the park across the street in Wosta. As soon as her friend sat down, my grandma would rush to put on her shawl and hurry out the door to go sit beside her. The two of them would then talk for hours, both facing forward but sometimes turning their heads toward each other and gesturing with their hands.

One day, the city of Wosta took the benches down and put a chain link fence around the park, so the old ladies couldn't do that anymore. It was too far to walk to the break in the fence and nowhere to sit anyway. The mysterious stranger even knew about that and told me a lot of old people in that neighborhood died shortly after the fence went up. They were living an old Polish custom of meeting outside and didn't know how to change it by going to each others' homes.

I spent a few weeks with my grandma at the end of the summer of 1964, just prior to being stabbed by Mountebank.

That's when I watched her cross the street to sit with her friend. Much as she had waited beside the front window for her friend to arrive, I stood by it watching the two of them talk together after she had gone out the door. It's one of my favorite memories of her.

Another one is hearing her walking around the house late at night and sensing she was thinking about me. I remember lying in bed listening to her moving quietly in the hall outside my room. It was during that stay with her that some of my last pre-Mountebank memories were formed. It was a wonderful time

and remains a region of great happiness in my mind. Though I was only thirteen, I felt big and strong and wholly alive. I have never felt that good or strong or alive since.

I think my mom would have been a talker sooner if Freud hadn't blocked her and most of her generation. I doubt my grandma knew about Freud and am sure she wouldn't have cared what he said if she did. But for my mom and dad and many others, Freud was like a chain link fence around introspection and intimate communication.

If you wanted to know about human psychology in those days, you read Freud or you read about Freud. And what you found was that boys wanted to fuck their mothers and kill their fathers. The idea is so crazy it somehow conned an entire generation in the West.

Did my father see me as a threat to him? I have no doubt he did, at least to some degree. Did my mom think I wanted to fuck her? The very idea appalls me, but I have no doubt that she must have at least been influenced by that thought. Did Paul's mom make sexual advances toward him when she was drunk because she had been influenced by Freud? I can't say for sure, but it is a sure thing that a good many boys and young men had bizarre relationships with their mothers and fathers in the mid-twentieth century due to ideas like the Oedipal Complex.

I know Denny Dink became angry when I told him I thought Freud was bullshit. Maybe that's all it took to get me put on that list.

In Buddhism, delusion is not made especially of lurid psychotic hallucinations but simply wrong ideas. The Buddha said life is a dream not because we are all psychotic brains in a vat, but because so many of our fundamental ideas are simply wrong.

It was as if in a dream that I was assaulted so many times as was probably my mom and other members of my family. The supremacist's dream of revenge against anyone or domination over everyone, the ludicrous dream of culling the herd, making us easier to control. That is delusion.

Does it ever balance out? I don't know. My mom's life balanced out, at least in relation to me.

I see her consciousness as perception, as something that is perceived. I see my sharing with her in the same way—as perception, as something we became aware of.

In our human realm, spiritual growth requires mistakes and it cannot be otherwise. Moral awareness is something that grows out of and beyond mistakes.

Ikkyu, the Zen monk, wrote: "Satori is mistake after mistake."

My mom is not her worldly biography, which is unknowable, but rather the awareness that grew through worldly experience.

You are not your moral or spiritual mistakes, which can be worn like shackles, but rather what you would do now if you were faced with those decisions again.

That's sort of what my mom did. She went back in her mind and mine and did many of the scenes over again.

I still have not had the chance or created the opportunity to redo old scenes with my sister Mira. If the mysterious strangers are right, she has been lying to me for decades. If they are wrong or lying themselves, then there is even more I don't understand about life.

One day at Circle Road, out of nowhere Mira did say something that seemed to allude to whatever she had been writing. We were seated at the kitchen table and she said, looking away and as if speaking not to me but to another part of her own mind, "We took some of your good stuff and gave it to us. And we took some of our bad stuff and gave it to you. So we all look about the same. But we are not the same." The first "we" referred to her and Jacques.

I didn't know what to say.

I have done everything in my power to not do that with this story. I considered every statement many times and viewed all of them from many angles. The words in this volume are as true as I know how to make them. The events described really happened and have not been exaggerated or twisted out of context. In fact, I have actually made the story *milder* than it really was. Many scenes are significantly *worse* than described. And many bad scenes have been left out. Any mistakes I have made are more than compensated for by the terrible things I have left out.

My mom blamed herself for everything and by so doing completely healed her relationship with me. But she was responsible for very little of what happened to me or her. Us slaves are strong and I could easily have put up with her ways and much more if not for Mountebank.

One of my favorite memories of my mom from when I was a boy is listening to her belt out church songs downstairs while I lay in my room reading. My nephew and niece, who lived with her for many years, got that from her too. It's a kind of soul music that comes out differently in all of us.

I know also that those two contributed greatly to my mom, and me. Seeing the next generation growing up helped her see over again how people are.

Pep and Carol are fine, though there have been problems with alcohol among people in their orbits. One person has reformed, and is a hero in my mind. The other has not. I can't help remark that if my mom had been an alcoholic she would never have had the inclination or the capacity to redo so many old scenes with me. If that is not a strong indictment against alcoholism, I don't know what is. To not *be able* to redo scenes from the past with your son or someone you care about is surely a waste of life as great as any other.

Heidi and I are living in a different state and enjoying our lives. I've acquired two more fine guitars since my mom died.

I suppose I should deal with the question of why my head was attacked so many times. There are several ways to answer this question. It might have been coincidence. Out of billions of people in the world, surely a few of us are attacked repeatedly for no apparent reason. It might have been due to something about me. Once Mountebank was done with me, I evidenced a kind of foolishness or weakness that attracts predators. It might have been due to my karma, either good or bad as the second mysterious stranger said. It might have been due to God punishing or helping me with strong lessons. It might have been the accident of my birth and upbringing in a town that harbored many cats and not enough mice. Was what happened to me and probably my family part of a much larger plot to destroy some group's "enemies" or competitors? It might have been.

Some of those answers, I don't like. Being a casualty in a secret war to destroy people "like me" feels gruesome. Yet, even that could be subsumed within the God or karma explanation and not feel so bad. If the treatment is just, if there is some credible reason for it, if the plot goes on beyond the point of injury and has a deeper meaning, it doesn't feel so bad. Even if it is a severe punishment for my sins, it doesn't feel so bad because then I have deserved it. The last mysterious stranger—the one I met in a cabin in California—even said at one point, "you probably deserved it." He said it under his breath, more as an aside than an accusation, but that is how some people think.

I am reasonably sure that I should have died a long time ago, but did not. Did God, karmic forces, higher beings, luck, or some other sort of coincidence bring that about? I do wonder. Was I saved or was the torture extended?

One more explanation for all of it is I am living in a computer simulation and consist of nothing more than energetic bits guided by software. That can be seen as hopeful if the designers of the simulation are good, which is likely. It could also be bad. Maybe the simulation has been forgotten in some basement or in an old station on some abandoned planet. Maybe the designers were bad. Maybe I am in a prison in the future, a prison that uses virtual reality to punish and instruct miscreants. Maybe reform works better when you do not know what you did wrong but are ushered toward conclusions that by themselves remove the original sin, the reasons for it.

The second mysterious stranger paused and looked knowing when I half-joked that I was probably some reborn old Jew who had hated people who look like me. I could see he thought it possible.

He also said, "No wonder this country is so fucked up. Anyone who figures it out is destroyed."

I have noticed through the years that many old friends ignore me if I reach out to them, just as the first mysterious stranger said they would. These are friends who have nothing against me, with whom I parted on very good terms. This shows how sensitive life is. People react deeply to fleeting expressions, misinterpreted words, or an hour with a professional interrogator. You don't even need to use poison.

One thing is certain—I never believe the surface appearance of anything anymore, and especially the surface appearance of human beings.

Like so many alcoholics, psychopaths *care* about you *deeply*. Malignant narcissists *care* about you.

They care about you because they want something from you—your death, you misery, your subjugation, your adulation, your flattery. By *caring* so much, they become *attractive* to certain kinds of people, people like me. A moth to a flame, a mouse with toxoplasmosis to a cat, a kind girl to a killer, a shy boy to a madwoman.

Normal people can be and are attracted to evil people. It's as if the software developers of the simulation of human life on planet earth had programmed a delusional fail-safe into the game. You can't ever get out of it because your best sensibilities—trust, kindness, sharing—lead to your destruction.

The Second Noble Truth is the truth of craving or clinging. You cannot crave anything or cling to anything in this world without being destroyed by it. Evil has a human face. It is not just a bottle or an idea. It might be your own face.

My mom became weak in her old age. I became weak after Mountebank. Weakness like that is not a character thing, it is a debility like poor vision or hearing. And like poor vision or hearing it can have benefits. Poor vision can make your eyes turn inward while poor hearing can make you listen deeply.

The weak know that emotion can be a drug, can be used like a drug.

I saw that in the faces of the shitheads, stoned on fantasy.

We cannot fully know the consequences of an act even after many years. Moral dimensions cannot be told solely from actors' intentions because good intentions can be bad. Bad intentions can make us recoil and withdraw, which can be good. Bad examples can make us be different. An evil person may believe they are protecting something good.

What we live and know from living is better and safer than what we learn from society. Society is a large and stupid version of the individual, though not without invaluable information. The story of your society is almost certainly false. History very much is a continuous revision of false stories while art is a continuous record of how and why they are false.

If you can't or won't or don't dare put the truth in your story, it's neither history nor art.

Did Stalin kill because he was paranoid or because it proved to him he was powerful? How else do the powerful know there is no one more powerful?

Is that the reason people poison others and maim them?

If you can get away with it it proves you are more powerful?

It is a military truism that it is better to wound an enemy than kill him because that removes two or three from the battle and requires yet more resources afterward. A wounded soldier becomes dependent and unproductive.

If the wounds are invisible, they will also influence others psychologically, lead them down a bad path as the mysterious stranger said.

There is not much scholarly information about poisoning or maiming. I couldn't find a single book on the history of poison or the use of clandestine techniques to maim individuals as a way to undermine whole societies.

For years, there have been rumors that the Chinese lobotomize uncooperative Tibetans. Bolsheviks and Nazis murdered intellectuals and military officers as soon as they moved into new territory, effectively crippling those societies. I do sometimes wonder if the very low rate of autopsy in the US is due to there being too many people like me in my generation and probably others.

It is so easy to poison someone or do psychosurgery on them. If you can drug them, you can also do the surgery with little additional skill required. A bit of planning, a poison dart or something in a drink, and the deed can be done with almost no chance of ever being caught.

An acupuncturist in San Diego, poked a needle in my hand without my permission and left town that night. And this was long after the second mysterious stranger said I was safe. She probably heard something from someone that furthered her delusion or had an old copy of the list. I barely knew her. Did the needle have HIV virus on it? I think there is a good chance it did. Fortunately, I did not get HIV.

Even if you think I am crazy and have made all of this up, you must admit that it is alarmingly easy to poison people and that a lot of maimed people weaken society. They do not produce, cannot compete, and draw resources away from other uses. It's an inexpensive and very effective way to dominate large

groups of people. The US military routinely kills hundreds of thousands. Why wouldn't some group use deception to do the same inside the US or anywhere else?

After a mere generation or two, competition will be reduced from capable rivals to low-life burdens on society. In Israel, many Palestinian children and teens are shot in the knees or in the eye, either with real bullets or rubber ones. Either way, the victim is maimed for life.

The king's spies always did more than just spy.

The third mysterious stranger told me that the mother of a friend had also probably poisoned me when I was a youngster. The stranger must have gotten his information from my old friend, with whom I lost touch after Mountebank. His mom sometimes made fantastic lunches for us, set them on plates, and then left the house. Before she left, she always told my friend in secret to be sure he ate only his own food and none of mine. She was a very well-mannered white lady from the South. She saw me as a competitor to her son.

I do notice a pattern where poisoners leave the scene soon after the poison is administered or the trap is set. Mountebank did it, Fecenian's grandma did it, the creepy guy in Madison did it, my friend's mom did it, and so did the acupuncturist in San Diego. The second stranger said of Mountebank that I made her feel guilty so she avoided me. Avoiding getting caught is another obvious reason for leaving town or the scene of the crime.

The other pattern I have observed is they stick around and watch you suffer, keep doing it for years. Fecenian did that, as did Chip, and many of the other shitheads. I can recall some of their faces and the smirks they wore. It's hard to imagine, isn't it?

That's how they get away with it. It's so horrible and sleazy and shitty, most people are unable to take their imaginations over there. But clearly some people can not only imagine it, they also do it. Poisoning is one of the easiest crimes to commit, especially if the victim is not killed but only harmed.

How many doctors or psychologists include poison as a possible etiology of mental illness, cognitive decline, or mood disorder?

I hate to admit it but when I was young I killed a lot of frogs, maybe thirty of them and possibly more. They used to be very common in rivers and streams because there was less pollution then. It took little skill to sneak up and smack them with a stick or shoot them with a BB gun. I feel really ashamed of that now, but at the time I didn't see anything wrong with it. They were "just" frogs. I felt like a boy hunter and still believe that behavior is instinctive.

So, I guess I was sort of a frog to the poisoners.

They saw me as both an adversary and a small creature, a creature of no importance to them. They were acting on their hunter instinct.

A human is supposedly the most interesting animal to hunt. So, in that sense they derived pleasure from hunting me even after they became adults.

Neoteny isn't just being cute.

The second mysterious stranger said, referring to his elders and the poisoning, "They always tell us that we have never done anything like this before… But they knew how to set it up very quickly and make it work. It was all already in place…"

His voice became dreamy, reserved, filled with mixed emotion.

One evening near the end, staring at the ceiling above her bed, my old mom said, "We're all just mysterious vegetables."

Before I knew what I know now, I had no idea there are so many conflicts, so many battles, so many enemies in this world.

I am sorry, but you can't love them away. If you are soft at your core, you will fall victim. If you trust too much, you will in effect be preempting yourself, surrendering to the lies of your unseen enemy. If your mind can't go there, someone else's will.

This is a terrible human failing—either we are innocent fools or insane devils.

Either we are vics or perps.

Better is to understand the middle path between and have wise defenses.

The reasons for this are moral and, if that is not convincing enough, practical—your deceptions may get figured out, thus arousing the devil in your hitherto trusting enemy.

The second mysterious stranger said, referring to my first novel and other works in history, "Others have tried to tell us, but we never listen. I don't know why.

"Why can't we just do our own thing?"

The third mysterious stranger asked me if there was anything in my life that I regretted.

In a brief conversation, there is no answer to that question so I said no. If I were to answer today, I would say I regret not leaving the night before Mountebank, as that wise nurse has exhorted me to do.

But if I had left, the second mysterious stranger said, things might have gone even worse for me. Without Mountebank's ministrations, I would have been stronger and received even worse poison from those who pursued me. He implied that I should be grateful to Mountebank because if not for her I would likely be dead by now. "We really respect people like you who benefit from bad conditions," he said.

I took no comfort at the time from his words, but today they feel better than nothing. It was part of the conversation where he said I was a scapegoat and that they "really respect that." How would you react?

My life ended on or about September 4, 1964. On that day, I fundamentally died.

In some important ways, I have an atheist view of death. It is oblivion, the end, nothing left, nothing new.

In other ways after hours of lucubration in the middle of a sickening dark night, I see that what died was only the package. Not perception, not deep awareness.

Something, someone, is still here.

In Buddhist terms, the small self died revealing the big self. The ego died revealing a glimpse of Buddha mind as if through shattered glass.

In Christian terms, my premature death led to a peculiar resurrection. Not *my* resurrection because what died can never be resurrected. But someone, something was reborn. Childish, awkward, stupid, clumsy, intemperate, almost deranged or even deranged, blind in so many ways.

But still here. Resurrected. Reborn.

A kind of monster. Not Frankenstein's monster but Mountebank's.

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